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FANTASTIC

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FANTASTIC, Vol. 15, No. 3, January, 1966 is published bi-monthly by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc., Editorial and subscription office: Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y., 11364. Business office: Purchase, N.Y., Box 175, Portchester, N.Y., at 50¢ a copy. Subscription rates: One year (6 issues) United States and possessions: $2.50; Canada and Pan American Union countries: $3.00; all other countries: $3.50. Second Class Postage paid at Flushing, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Copyright 1965 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc. All rights reserved. Editorial contributions must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care; however, publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of art work, photographs or manuscripts.

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EDITORIAL

RECENTLY we've been taking a good hard look at those hazy—but historic—photographs sent back so painstakingly from Mars, and at the breathtaking color films of Major White's walk-in-space, an unforgettable sequence that looks more like science fiction than science fiction itself. Then there are those gorgeous color stills of Earth snapped by Cooper and Conrad. That was the clincher—one look and we knew that in at least one respect S-F would never be the same again.

In fact, ever since then we've been wondering why our critics —who usually attack us on literary grounds—don't begin opening up on our artwork—the steady stream of magazine covers and interior illustrations that for so long have helped to fix the images most S-F writers still think of when their descriptions really get going.

Take a look at any dozen recent back issues of all the magazines in the field, and you'll see what we mean. Notice how frequently the same scenes, the same technological hardware reappears—especially the rocket launchings straight out of Cape Kennedy, the orbiting satellites, the spacesuited figures, the Lunar or Martian approaches (canals still prominent)—all of them so familiar by now that they've become the visual clichés of science fiction. After a while you'll see how S-F artists are lagging behind, trying to duplicate—with painstaking fidelity—what space-cameras have already recorded—often with a single click of the shutter.

But if the function of the science-fiction writer is to stay *ahead* of science, then it seems to us that his collaborator—the science-fiction artist—should also be right up there with him—trying to show us what no camera can possibly see—at least not yet. Scenes like the first soft landing on a Mars without canals, a surface more moonlike than Martian. Or the strangely glittering constellations of the night sky as seen through truly *alien* eyes, a sight not necessarily anything like our own binocular view of the universe. Or even—who knows?—an incredible close-up of one of those baffling quasars radiating so fantastically far out there on the edges of the known universe.

A tall order? Yes—but unless the present generation of science-fiction artists does some-

(*Continued on page 160*)

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By now everyone who reads science fiction regularly (and many who don't) knows who Walter M. Miller, Jr., is—the Hugo-winning author of A Canticle for Leibowitz, *"The Darfstellar," and* Conditionally Human, *to mention only a few of his finest stories. But how many of you also remember that he began his science-fiction career with "Secret of the Death Dome" (in* Amazing Stories, *our companion magazine) and soon followed it with the magnificent "Dark Benediction" (right here in* Fantastic)? *Well, we haven't, and to celebrate that fact we bring you one of the best of his long stories, "Six and Ten Are Johnny" (beautifully illustrated by Virgil Finlay). —Don't let the odd title put you off. This one's a chiller—and it shows all the same writing skill that went to make* Canticle *a modern classic.*

SIX and TEN are JOHNNY

By WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

Illustrator: VIRGIL FINLAY

THE launch left the starship *Archangel* at 0830 hours with a landing party of six, including the pilot. It rocketed backwards along the *Archangel*'s orbital path, then dropped rapidly toward the unbroken blanket of clouds that covered the surface of the newly discovered planet. Commander Isaacs and Lieutenant Esperson stared after it in silence until it disappeared as a tiny gleam in the distance. Then they turned to watch its blip on the radar. The greenish glow of the screen smoothed their faces into shadowless masks—the commander's expressionless, the lieutenant's glowering in thought.

As the launch's trace waned into insignificance, Isaacs glanced at Esperson with a faint smile.

"Worried?"

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The lieutenant nodded.

"About what? The life forms?"

"Yeah. I had a close look at that jungle. I'd hate to sit down in the middle of it."

"The photos you brought back don't look so bad. Reminds me of the Matto Grosso from the air."

Esperson shook his blond head quickly. "You should have seen the colors, Skipper. Infrared pics don't show it the way I saw it—down under that shroud. Muddy yellow oceans, black mountains, dead white lava flows. And that jungle—it's a rotten chartreuse with big albino patches and livid streaks in it. Place looks infected, murky, brooding. Glad I didn't have to land."

"The boys'll be all right," Isaacs said jovially. "There's no evidence of intelligence. And they have enough weapons to handle any ordinary predators."

"But bacteria—"

"They'll take precautions. They took a couple of dogs along for testers and tasters. Ordinary antiseptic measures have sufficed in the past."

The communicator suddenly hummed, then spoke. "Isaacs from Launch One. We're hitting some atmosphere. How do you read me? Over."

The commander reached for a microphone. "This is Isaacs. Read you loud and clear, Rogan. Call every five minutes on the way down. If you can't land at the place we picked, give us the exact coordinates of a better spot and go on in. Over."

"Wilco and out."

Isaacs grinned at his lieutenant. "Rogan sounds nervous too. Want to sweat him out?"

"Yeah."

"Take over then. I'm going to log some sack time."

Isaacs left the cabin, and Esperson sat alone before the scope, watching the glowing globe of the mist-wrapped planet, alone since the beginning of time, now an unwilling hostess to the intruding biped from the third planet of another sun-star.

The planet was still officially nameless, designated only as G_0GC-2794-II from the spectral class and catalog number of its sun, but the crew had nicknamed it "The Nun" because of its chaste and mysterious veil of clouds. For nearly a month, the *Archangel* had been drifting in a sixteen-hour orbit around the new world, mapping its land masses by radar and sending launches down to penetrate the atmosphere for samples and close-up photographs of the surface. But it was hard to find a place where the clouds had lifted enough to give a clear view of the land, even from an altitude of a thousand feet. After ten trips down in a launch—without

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actually landing—Esperson had managed to bring back a dozen passable photographs of scattered stretches of jungle. They had revealed nothing to suggest a civilized species. But Rod Esperson had a bad feeling about the place. The jungle seemed to billow and roll, but not in the way a wind would sway it.

"Isaacs from Launch One," blared the communicator.

Esperson reached for the mike. "The skipper went to bed, Hal. This is Rod. Go ahead."

"Hi, Pal. Nothing to report. Nothing but fog."

"Are you in it yet?"

"Just below us. We're well into the atmosphere though. Altitude twelve miles. Radar's picking up the plateau."

"Hope you can land there. Not another flat place like that in five hundred miles."

There was a brief pause, then: "I'm not particularly interested in landing at all, Rod. There's something about this place—Oh, never mind. Listen, are you going to hold that orbit?"

"I guess so. Your blast-off and interception calculations were based on our holding this course. The planet rotates in twenty hours; we go around in the same direction in sixteen hours. You'll lag behind us four and a half degrees per hour. We'll be on your horizon twenty hours from now, and we'll rise again in your west sixty hours from now. You can blast-off then and we'll rendezvous in eighty hours."

"Yeah, but I don't like that forty hours. You'll be below horizon, Rod. Can't you get in a twenty-hour orbit and stay right overhead, so we can keep in touch?"

"Sorry, Hal—there's satellite debris out there. Too much chance of getting clobbered by a half-mile hunk of rock. You'll have to spend forty hours on your own."

Esperson waited, wondering if it wouldn't be better to risk ramming a satelloid and keep the landing launch in communicator-range. It had been Isaacs' decision to hold the present orbit. Esperson had wanted to risk the belt, maneuvering into it slowly, and mooring *Archangel* to the biggest satelloid near a twenty-hour orbit so as to stay with the natural drift of the debris. While they stayed with the drift, they would be reasonably safe; but getting in and out of the belt was dangerous business, and Isaacs had decided against it. He preferred leaving six men unprotected for forty hours to endangering the entire seventy-man crew of the *Archangel*.

Five minutes passed. Hal Rogan called again, reporting that the launch was now descending through the thick envelope of peasoup. He laughed nervously.

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"Everybody's got a headache, Rod—all six of us. How about you? Did you get a sore skull when you came down here? Two guys are sick."

"You aren't breathing the atmosphere yet, are you? Lots of CO_2 in it. That might do it."

"No, we're still on the pressure cylinders. But everybody's got a headache. Did you get one?"

Rod paused. "Not that I noticed. But then—I've got a silver plate in my noodle, Hal. Fractured skull five years ago. I've adjusted to one continuous headache. Don't tell the skipper, though."

"Check. It may be that our air pumps are fouled up. I'll check it. Over and out."

It wouldn't be much longer now, Esperson thought. They would be landing on the low mesa and walking for the first time on the surface of the veiled Nun. And the mesa was now only a couple of hours east of the twilight line. Soon after landing, the clouds would darken, and starless night would fall over them.

They would be safe in the ship. Or would they? The small launch was considerably less massive than some of the reptilian brutes that Earth had invented during her Mesozoic era.

He gazed fixedly at his watch. The time came for another call. But the communicator remained silent. Fifteen seconds . . . thirty . . . forty-five . . . .

Tensely anxious he keyed his mike. "Hal from Rod. Give me a call. Over."

Moments later the answer came. "Sorry, Rod. I was watching the radar. We're flying at five thousand feet. Where's the bottom of this soup?"

"Lying on the ground, maybe. If you don't break through, don't risk a radar landing."

"You don't have to beg me."

"How're the headaches?"

"Mine's about gone. Everybody's okay—so far."

"Try to stay that way. Keep in contact, will you? I like to know what's going on."

"I'll give you a running commentary: fog—fog—fog. Period."

Esperson waited, listening to an occasional blurt of static caused by solar activities. Two minutes passed.

"I think we're breaking through, Rod. It's thinning out a little. We're at fifteen hundred feet."

"Above what?"

"The plateau. There! I think now maybe—" His voice choked off for a moment. Harsh breathing in the microphone.

"What's wrong, Hal?"

The reply was low and tense. "Jeeziss The color of that jungle! Putrid-looking—everything

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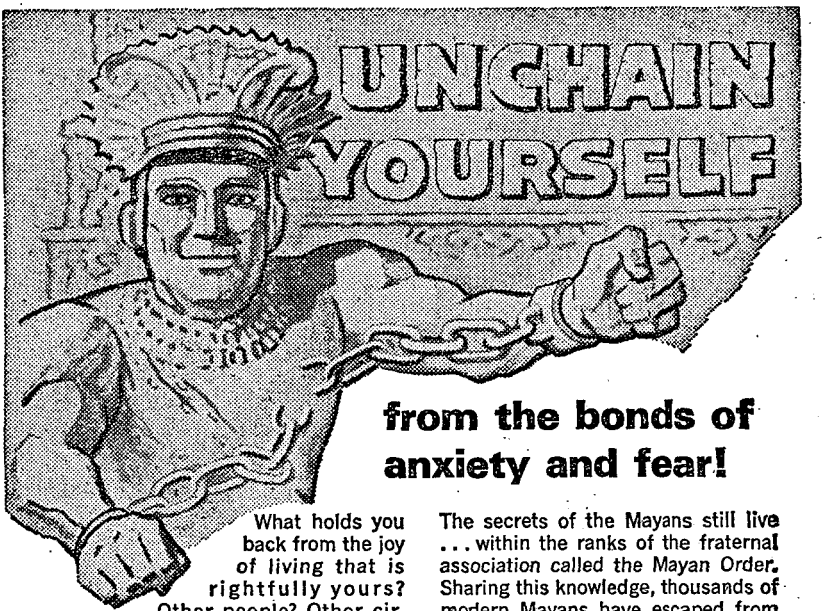

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is. You can almost smell the stink, just looking at it."

Rod nodded at the screen. "Yeah—it gave me the same kind of a bang. How's the mesa look?"

"Flat. Flat enough to land, damn it! We're going down now."

The launch pilot was keeping his microphone keyed. He turned up the audio-input, and Rod listened to the growl of the rockets as the launch nosed vertically upward and settled on its tripedal tail. The growl grew louder, then faded. There was a shuddering crash, then silence.

"Hal!"

"Yeah. Well, we're down."

"What do you see?"

"Vines, mostly. Whole mesa's covered with vines. We're about a hundred yards from the drop-off down to the jungle. And, I guess the mesa's about a hundred yards above the tree-tops—if you can call them trees."

"See any animals?"

"No—but Winters claims he saw something flying over the jungle. Nobody else saw it."

"Well, if you go outside, wear suits—until you see what happens to the dogs."

"Yeah, the boys are turning out the pups now. Seems to be a little commotion. Pups don't want to go."

"Place probably smells strange to them. That would do it."

"Well—listen, Rod. I'm going to get in a suit and lead the dogs outside. I'll take a remote unit with me and keep in touch with you."

"Be careful, Hal. Go armed."

"Six grenades, a rocket-lobber, and side-arms. How's that? I'll call back when I get outside. Over and out."

Rod took advantage of the break to rouse Isaacs on the interphone. The commander sputtered sleepy babble for a moment.

"They're down, Skipper. Want to talk to Rogan?"

"Uh, yeah, after a while. Any trouble?"

"Nothing but nerves so far. I'm worried about nightfall."

"They can stay in the launch after dark."

"Yeah—six steaks in a package."

"What?"

"Nothing. You coming down?"

"Be there in a minute."

Rod turned back to the communicator and waited. After three minutes, he tried a call. There was no answer. He began calling at thirty second intervals. Then Hal's carrier hummed, and he heard the dogs.

"Good Lord, Hal! What's wrong with the pups? Sound like they had their rumps painted with Tabasco sauce."

The launch-pilot's voice came back angry and tremulous. "One of them damn near tore a rip in my suit. They've gone nuts, Rod.

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Trying to get back in the airlock. Jeez! Francey just tore a hunk out of Mutt's ear. *Listen* to that!"

The dogs were shrieking rather than howling. There was nothing mournful about their cries, but only hysterical fright or pain. He heard tearing and stumbling sounds, assumed they were caused by the dogs scrambling about in the vines.

"Hal?"

"Yeah?"

"It's probably the carbon dioxide. Content's probably high enough to cause delusions of suffocation, for a while anyway. Better stay away from them."

"You *think* I'm crazy?"

"Is everybody out of the ship?"

"Yeah. It's getting kind of dark. Winters is getting set up to take some pictures from the top of the cliff. Jameson is getting some soil samples. Richards is having a look at the plants that grow up here. But damn, Rod—it all looks like one big plant to me. Everything looks like it's joined together. Vines grow right over the side of the cliff and down into the jungle. I can't make out any individual trees either. It looks like one solid tree with a million trunks, only the foliage looks more like the vines."

"See any animals yet—? Wait a minute, Hal—the skipper just came in. I'll let him take over."

Still rubbing his eyes, Isaacs took the microphone. "'Lo, Rogan. Everything okay down there?"

"Sure, Skipper," Hal purred. "Hope you had a nice little rest and didn't get up just on *my* account."

Isaacs darkened, glowered at the microphone. "That's enough sarcasm for now, Rogan. I didn't think you needed my guidance."

"I don't."

"*What* then? An audience?"

"Forget it, Boss."

"Heh heh! Yes, well—how about it? Think you'll have time to send two men out to scout the vicinity before dark?"

"I can see all the vicinity from here. What do you want scouted?"

"The jungle, naturally."

There was an unpleasant silence, broken only by the dogs' frantic cries in the background.

"The jungle—*now?*"

"If you have the time before dark. What's the difference, now or tomorrow?"

"I've got a feeling," Rogan muttered. "If we waited long enough, the jungle'd come up to scout us."

"What kind of drivel—?"

"Nothing, Skipper. I'll send a couple of men to look for a way down the cliff. Doubt if we can get down and back before dark though."

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"Okay—you have a list of data you're supposed to collect. Collect it as soon as possible. That's all. Keep in touch with Esperson here."

Isaacs handed the microphone back to Rod, peered at the radar for a moment, then stalked out of the cabin and closed the door.

"He's gone, Hal."

"Having a fine time. Wish to hell he was here."

"Still worried?"

"I don't know. It's funny—"

"What's funny?"

"I'm not so nervous now. Feel kind of good, little sleepy. Even the dogs have shut up."

"Worn out, maybe."

"Maybe. Anyway, they simmered down all of a sudden. They're just lying there on their bellies. Panting and looking around. It's funny—"

"Yeah?"

"I think the jungle bothered me at first because—well, it kinda wriggles. Or it looks that way. But if you look at it right, it—it's got a weird sort of beauty. If you *think* about it right, that is."

"How do you mean?"

"The way it wriggles, real slow—like something climbing around in the branches, something you can't see. That gave me a chill at first. But once you figure it's not something climbing, but just the trees moving, then it's all right."

Rod shivered. "Doesn't sound all right to me! How quick could you get out of there if you had to?"

Hal laughed calmly. "Don't get ulcers up there, Rod. We'll be okay."

"I don't like the way you sound so sure all of a sudden."

Hal laughed again. "I'm going to sign off for awhile. Think the boys have found something. I'll call you back before dark."

"Okay."

Rod peered out the port at the plump crescent of the Nun hanging in space. Then he estimated where the twilight line would fall on the disk that showed on the radar scope. It was somewhere in the region of the mesa, and he knew that it must be nearly dark where the launch lay.

Minutes later, Isaacs wandered back, munching alternately from a square of hardtack and a slab of compressed dried beef. "Hungry?" he grunted around a mouthful of food.

Rod shook his head. He was too anxious about Hal Rogan to leave the communicator.

"Thirsty?" Isaacs deposited the beef atop the radar and handed him a flask.

"Water?"

"Fifty percent of it is."

Esperson had a long drink. The other fifty percent proved warmly relaxing—after he

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stopped gagging on it. He knew the skipper was less untroubled than he tried to appear. Isaacs seldom tippled. He sat next to Rod, peered absently at the radar, and washed down nibbles of food with sips of cut alcohol.

"You know, Esp—we ought to get a good bonus out of the Commission for this one."

"Hal Rogan and his boys ought to get one, that's for sure."

"Eh? Oh, I wouldn't worry about them."

"I'd feel better if we were in a twenty-hour orbit."

"Don't be a half-wit. I can't put seventy men in jeopardy for the sake of six."

"Yeah."

"Don't you agree?"

"Yeah. I just said I'd feel better, that's all."

Isaacs sneered half in jest. "Why didn't *you* volunteer to go down instead of Rogan?"

Rod shrugged. "You had too many volunteers anyway. I stick my neck out when it's necessary, not before. Okay?"

"Okay with me. As long as you're around when it's necessary."

"Tell you what: for an extra thousand a month, you can consider me a perpetual volunteer for everything."

"Suckers come cheaper than that."

"I know it."

Isaacs grinned and handed him the flask. He sipped it politely but ineffectively, and grinned widely back at him.

Rogan's carrier was flicking on and off, as if he started several times to put in a call, then thought better of it. Isaacs grumbled and reached for the mike, but Rogan's voice came through suddenly. Rogan sounded amused—hysterically amused, maybe.

"Rod, this is Hal. You with me? Over."

"This is Isaacs, Rogan. Stop giggling. What do you want?"

"There's a house."

Isaacs looked at Esperson and blinked. "What did he say?"

Rod Esperson's beefy face went slack. "He said—'There's a house.'"

"That's what I thought he said." Isaacs keyed the mike again. "What the devil are you talking about, Rogan?"

"There's a house, Skipper—down at the foot of the cliff." Rogan giggled again. "It's a log house with a thatched roof. Got a light in it, and there's a fat man standing in the doorway. I can see his silhouette. He waved at us."

Rod's scalp reminded him that his ancestors once possessed erecticle hackles.

He licked his lips and stared at the skipper. Isaacs went white, then pink.

"*Don't make cute jokes with*

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me, Rogan!" he bellowed. "One more crack like that and I'll have the detention cabin ready for you, boy!"

"Blow it out your obscenity!" the speaker barked. "I said there's a house down there with a light in it and a man in the doorway. Only now he's outside. He's coming up the cliff."

Isaacs sputtered and dropped the microphone. Rod grabbed it.

"What the devil do you mean, Hal—'a man'? A human? That's impossible."

"It's getting so dark, it's hard to see. Looks completely human." He paused to bellow at someone about getting a spotlight out of the ship. Then: "Hold on, Rod I'll call you back."

"*Wait!* Don't get off the air!"

But it was too late. Rogan had evidently switched off his set. Isaacs was still growling wrathfully to himself.

"I'll have him canned, by God! Court-martialed! I'll—"

"There was *something*, Skipper!" Rod offered. "I heard the dogs howling again."

"That's the way Rogan'll howl when I—"

"Take it easy, Boss. He's not kidding. That planet could conceivably have humanoid life forms."

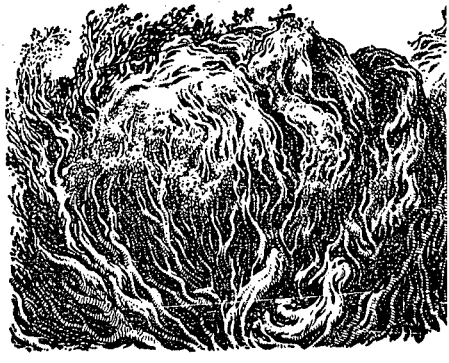
"Baloney!"

"It has trees."

"So what?"

"Where there are trees, some animals'll learn to climb them. Tree climbers, unless they're rather small, usually develop hands. And their spines get pulled vertical by hanging from limbs. Hands are good for grasping more things than limbs. It's easier to pick fruit than it is to bite off a twig. The cleverest ones begin finding new things to do with their hands—like swinging clubs to beat hell out of the beasts that chased them up in the trees in the first place. So you've got a biped with hands and a club; the ones with enough sense to use them efficiently do a good job of survival. Whenever you've got trees, why shouldn't you have humanoids—eventually?"

Isaacs started to growl, then



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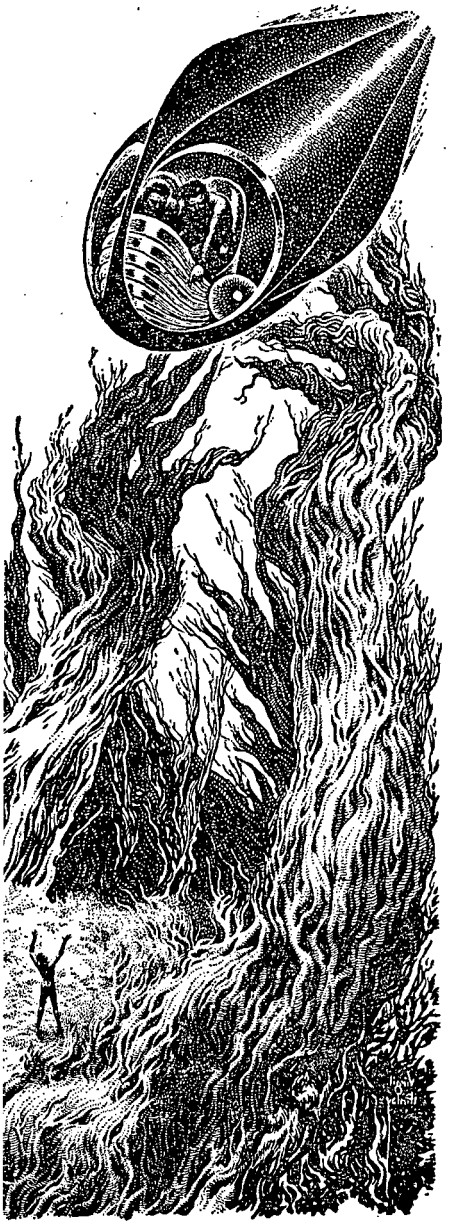

paused, grunted thoughtfully, and subsided: "Yeah, I've heard that drivel before. But I've also seen planets with trees—usually inhabited by winged lizards or snakes disguised to look like vines. No humanoids, Esp."

The lieutenant shrugged. "First time, maybe. Anyhow—I know Hal pretty well. He's not kidding, Skipper."

Isaacs took a stiff drink and glared at the communicator. "Call him back again right away."

"Hal from Rod. Skipper wants you. Get on the air. Over."

They waited—to no avail.

"Rogan from Esperson! Acknowledge me, damn it! Skipper wants you. Over!"

"Chatting with friend humanoid, no doubt," Isaacs said sourly. "I'll kill that jockey." He began thoughtfully beating a big fist into his palm.

"Maybe he's in trouble, Boss."

"Yeah—he *is*—I assure you of that."

They fell into brooding silence. The twilight line of the shrouded Nun had crept past the low mesa, and Rod knew that the landing site was immersed in black night. Occasionally he reached for Isaacs' flask, and an hour later the Skipper went to get it refilled. The communicator remained silent, except for bursts of mild solar interference.

Isaacs got out a manual of

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space code and began leafing through it with grim purpose. After a time he chuckled quietly, and muttered aloud. "In the event that the ship be in flight such that the next scheduled clocking at a Class A post is greater than 120 days' ship's time from date of misdemeanor or felony, ship's commander may administer summary punishment for offenses not exceeding Class 3 in gravity in order to secure immediate discipline. For Class 3 offenses, twenty lashes with a whip of rawhide not exceeding—"

"Can it, Boss. You can't get away with it."

"I can dream, bigawd! Call Rogan again."

"Launch One, this is the *Archangel*. Do you read me, Hal? Over."

After a moment, the carrier wave hissed quietly. "Hello, Rod—Hal. Sorry, my set went out on me. Listen, we weren't the first ship to land on this planet."

"What are you talking about? No Commission ship has ever scouted this planet before."

"I know, but remember the *Yorick?*"

"Uh—wait a minute." He glanced at Isaacs. "Ever hear of the *Yorick?*"

"Starship that got lost about ten years back. No trace of it since. But if he's going to say—"

"Okay, Hal. Skipper reads you. Go on."

"This guy—this Johnny—he was on the crew. The *Yorick* wasn't lost. Bum chemicals in the hydroponics; all but three of the crew died of chemical poisoning. The three couldn't handle the ship alone. They took a launch and came here."

Rod exchanged a puzzled glance with Isaacs. The skipper licked his lips and shook his head doubtfully. "Sounds fishy, Esp."

"Hal?"

"Yeah?"

"You'd better start at the beginning."

"Okay. Well, you were listening when we spotted this guy and his cabin. He came running up to the mesa as soon as he saw what we were. He's half nuts, Rod—from living by himself all this time. But he started talking English. We got the story out of him in bits and snatches."

"Wait a minute. You said there were three of them. What happened to the other two?"

"We can't get it straight. He's off his rocker. He keeps saying, 'But they're both right here, bethide me'—he lisps. I guess they died. He keeps talking to them, when we leave him alone. Three beds in the cabin, three places at the table. Kinda gets you. He's such a pathetic chap."

"What's his name?"

"Johnny—Johnny Sree, I

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think. Short fat fellow with big round eyes and a baby face. About forty, maybe—but it's hard to tell on account of the discolorations."

"Huh?"

"His skin and hair have turned darn near the color of this jungle—chartreuse and splotched. Not really, but almost. He says the food did it. I don't know whether it's something he ate here or the chemical poisoning that clobbered the *Yorick*'s crew. It's hard to get much out of him. He just fawns on everybody and sniffles and talks about how much he'd like to have a chocolate eclair and a cup of creole coffee."

"Where's the launch he came in?"

"Not much telling. He doesn't seem to know. He might have wandered five hundred miles in ten years."

Isaacs grabbed the microphone. "Listen, Rogan," he snarled. "I've got to stop and think this over. But by God, you keep that damn receiver on this time, or I'll have you fed to the test-dogs in small bites!"

"Oh, that reminds me, Chief. The dogs are dead."

"Wh-h-hat?"

"Dead. When Johnny came up, they went crazy again. Tried to kill him. We had to shoot them."

"Fool! Now you'll have to stay in your suits!"

There was a brief pause. "We took 'em off an hour ago, Skipper. After all, Johnny's better proof than the dogs. He's been around ten years."

Rod watched Isaacs for an explosion. But the skipper wore an icy smile. He spoke softly.

"Okay, Rogan. That's all right with me. And you can wear the suits after you get back to the ship—*all the way back to Earth*—for the crew's protection. Of course, they get a little filthy after five months, but you won't mind. Goodbye, Rogan."

The launch pilot stammered witlessly for a moment, then signed off. Rod lit a cigaret and stared at the commander.

"Want me to take another launch and go down—?"

"No."

"Well—what about it?"

"About what?"

"This Johnny Sri, or Sree."

The skipper tapped a pencil and glowered silently at his own thoughts for a time. He doodled a few figures on a scratch pad, then looked up with a crafty smile.

"The Nun has about sixty million square miles of land area, doesn't it?"

"Y'ah."

"About half of which lies in a viable temperature zone."

"Check."

"Then the odds against Rogan's just happening to land

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within a five-mile radius of any given point are about four hundred thousand to one. The odds against an accidental landing within five miles of this—this Johnny Sree."

"Why talk about the odds against something that's already happened?"

"Because I wonder if it was accidental."

Rod snorted. "Wake up, Skipper. *You and I* picked the site!"

"I know, I know." Isaacs clasped his hands behind his back and paced the deck. "But why did we pick it?"

"Only decent place I found when I went down under the clouds."

"Why?"

"The fog was lifted there. You know all this! I don't get—"

"*Why* was the fog lifted there?"

Rod snorted disgust. "Call the Nun's weather bureau. What the devil are you groping for?"

"I don't know, I don't know at all." He grimaced and clucked to himself. "I just don't like freak accidents. And bumping into a lone survivor that way is a freak accident."

"Well, if you've got a hunch, why don't you have Rogan haul this Johnny back up here right now? We'll have a look at him."

"No!" He shook his head vigorously. "I won't act on a blind hunch, even in a minor matter. It's a bad habit to get into. Let Rogan use his own judgment. If he feels safe down there, he might as well finish gathering data before he comes back."

Isaacs paused, then stalked to a shelf of books and pulled down an old copy of *Annual Report of the Space Commission.* He thumbed through it.

"The *Yorick,*" he muttered, "Class K-O, thirty thousand tons, five-space cruising speed three-fifty cees, rocket thrust five-hundred meganewtons, crew ninety-five—lost after last report at coordinates . . . ." He stopped reading, returned the book to the shelf, and sighed. "Maybe I'm just jumpy, Esperson. The last report was about three light-years from here—in Fornax."

"You mean you didn't believe this Johnny was a crewman?" Rod laughed. "Sure—local fauna evolves humanoids, also evolves an Earth language, and a knowledge of chocolate eclairs."

Isaacs flushed. "Telepathy, maybe."

"Gathering notions to bolster your hunch?"

"All *right,* damn it! What do you think then, Esperson?"

"Nothing."

"You think everything's okay down there?"

Rod paused. "I've got no logical thoughts about it. Just a feeling."

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"What's that?"

"It's nasty. Can't quite put my finger on it. When I look at that damn chartreuse jungle—well, it reminds me of an old spacer I knew once. He went schizo on Mars Station. Hated everybody. He'd sit and brood, and stare out at the lichen patches. Pretty soon his face'd start wiggling, changing expression—fear, rage, lust, and then gloating cruelty. He'd whisper to himself. You'd wonder who he was murdering in his daydreams and how."

Isaacs didn't laugh. "Of course, I haven't seen the jungle —"

"What bothers me: Rogan's feelings seemed to change after he landed."

There was a long silence. Isaacs sighed. "Well, call him up —tell him to go according to schedule and bring this fellow back at rendezvous time."

Rod nodded and reached for the mike.

"And tell him to report in every hour until we're below his horizon."

He put in the call, and Hal answered in a leisurely voice. He could hear laughter in the background.

"Having wonderful time," Rogan called jovially. "Wish you were here."

"You sound drunk. What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing, nothing at all. Just finished a big meal. Made me sleepy. Johnny's a good cook. Fed all five of us like kings."

"Johnny! Migawd! You don't mean you're eating stuff that grows down there!" He glanced in horror at Isaacs who was shaking his head and wiping his face.

"Sure, Rod. Food's fine. Nothing wrong with it. Say—I like this place! Be marvelous for a colony."

"Tell him to come back up," muttered the Skipper. "They've gone nuts! Tell him to pile back in that launch and get back up here immediately."

"Bringing Johnny?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, listen Hal! Skipper's orders: return to the *Archangel* immediately. Let the survey go. Let everything go. Get back up here, and bring Johnny."

There was a long silence; then Rogan grunted belligerently.

"Why?"

Isaacs grabbed the mike. "Because I said to, you obscenity!" he roared.

"Sorry, Skipper," Rogan said dully. "I can't."

"What?"

"I can't. One of the jets is out. Greeley's working on it."

"As soon as it's fixed then, get back up here!"

"I don't see why."

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"You don't *need* to see why, Rogan. I'm leading the band."

"Well—okay, but it'll take a while. Half a day at least."

"Call in every hour. That's all."

"Check, Boss. Over and out."

Isaacs and Esperson mused in silence for a time.

"Wonder what he meant—'fed all five of them'," Isaacs muttered. "Where's the sixth?"

"Greeley—working on the ship," Rod offered.

"Oh—yeah." The skipper blew a hard breath. "Go get some rest if you want to, Esperson. I'll make the next couple of contacts."

Rod retired willingly. From his hammock he could see the thin white crescent of the Nun through the viewing port. He shuddered and turned his back on it.

He awoke with the feeling that someone had called him. He glanced at the Nun again. The crescent was facing the opposite direction. He looked at his watch —nearly a nine-hour sleep.

"Esperson!" growled the interphone call system. "How many times do I have to call? Answer me."

He fumbled sleepily for the call switch. "Sorry, Skipper—I was dead. What's up?"

"Get down here right away."

"Trouble?"

No answer. Isaacs was evidently busy at something. Rod switched his jack-box to command-position and listened briefly to the radio. Rogan was on, arguing hotly with Isaacs. He made little sense of it.

He dressed hurriedly and paced down the corridor to the control cabin. Isaacs faced the communicator, white-faced and speechless. He changed chairs when Rod entered.

"You talk to him, Esp. Maybe I'm crazy."

"Talk about what?"

"Just talk to him.

He lifted the mike thoughtfully.

"Hal, this is Rod. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong!" snapped the loudspeaker. "Skipper's playing jokes, that's all."

"Sorry, I missed it. What're you talking about?"

"Ask him!"

Rod looked questioningly at Isaacs. The commander's face was a rigid mask, his eyes narrow. He grunted a command.

"Ask Rogan how many men went down in the launch."

"Six did—you know that."

"*Ask* him."

"Hello, Hal—how many men in your party?"

Rogan's tone was disgusted. "You too, huh? Okay, I'll call the roll: Winters, Greeley, Jameson, and myself."

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"Go on."

"That's *it!* Four! Quit your kidding!"

Rod's scalp crawled. "What about Richards and Elvin?"

"Oh *nooooo!* All right, we'll play games. Richards married Elvin and they went on a honeymoon. Listen—I never heard of any Richards or Elvin. Cut it out, will you? You give me the creeps."

"*We* give *him* the creeps!" Isaacs groaned.

"What are you doing now?" Rod called.

"Finishing my breakfast."

"More of Johnny's cooking?"

"Sure. He enjoys having company."

"How's that defective tube?"

"Greeley's still working on it. Few more hours should do it."

"We'll be below your horizon pretty quick now."

"So what?"

"Yeah." He swallowed hard and looked at the skipper. "What can I say to him?"

"Nothing that I haven't already said. Just break it off."

"That's all, Hal. Call us immediately if any more men disappear."

"Who's disappeared? Quit it, will you?"

"Yeah. Over and out."

The cabin was full of hard breathing. Isaacs got up and paced the floor. Esperson brooded by the radio.

"Skipper, shall I take a launch now and go down—"

"No! No more men on the Nun!"

"Look, Rogan's my friend. It's my neck if—"

Isaacs shook his head. "Wait until they get that tube fixed. Then we'll see."

An hour later, Rogan called again to report progress. Greeley would be finished soon. But the communicator signal had lost strength, now emanating from the very limb of the planet. Soon they'd be out of contact.

"I can't stand just sitting here, Skipper!"

"Then go take a walk."

"I'd rather take a flight. Down."

"No."

Rod cradled his head in his hands and stared grimly at the deck. "I wish we had some answers."

"To what questions?"

"That's just it! There aren't even any sensible questions to ask. How can you ask about Richards and Elvin when Rogan won't even admit their existence?"

The skipper smiled mirthlessly. "I learned a few things while you were asleep."

"About what?"

"That jungle. It's all one big organism—grown together. I got Rogan to hold still long enough

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to tell me about it. It's an animal and vegetable duality. Symbiosis to the point of part-time identity. Did Rogan mention the flying things to you?"

"Yeah."

"They grow on the trees, like fruit. But they're apparently animal. They break loose when they're mature. The jungle feeds them. In return, they keep the insects out of the trees. And Rogan said something about there being an animal down there too, but I didn't get it straight."

"*One* animal?"

"Evidently. He said he hadn't seen it though. But it's that jungle that bothers me. Apparently the keynote of life on the Nun is cooperation rather than conflict."

"How's that?"

"The jungle feeds Johnny too. Deliberately, I mean. Rogan said the fruit grows right in through the window of the cabin." He laughed peculiarly. "I guess it put on a few extras for the boys."

Rod shivered. "And what does Johnny do for the jungle?"

"There," Isaacs said grimly, "you have a good question."

The time for another contact was approaching. Rod tried three times before he heard an answering signal.

". . . barely hear you, Rod," came Rogan's faint voice. "You're on my horizon. When are you going to send somebody down . . . ." A crackle of static drowned the rest of it.

"Hal from Rod, Hal from Rod. Say again, please. You want us to send somebody down. I didn't get the rest of it. Say again, please. Over."

The voice came as a feeble whisper. ". . . somebody down to fix the tube. Nobody here knows how. When are you going to . . . ."

"Hal from Rod. I thought Greeley had it about fixed. What's wrong. Can't Greeley finish what he started? Over."

"Say again, Rod. Didn't quite get that name. Over."

"Greeley. Greeley. I spell: george - roger - easy - easy - love-easy-yoke. Greeley. Can't he fix it? Over."

". . . never heard of Greeley. More gags, huh?"

"Oh no!" Esperson clapped his forehead and groaned. Isaacs made a sick sound in his throat.

"Hal from Rod. Who's down there? Call the roll again."

"I'm getting sick of this," came the weak whisper. "There's me—Rogan. Okay?"

"Who else?"

"Winters and Jameson, of course! And Johnny Six."

"Huh! I thought his name was Sree?"

"Three? What gave you that idea? Not Three—*Six.*"

"But you said—*Sree!*" Esperson nearly screamed it.

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"Not Sree either. I didn't say anything of the kind. I said Six."

Rod stuttered for a moment and offered the microphone to Isaacs. Isaacs stared at it and shook his head. He looked dazed.

"Listen!" Rod shouted. "Can't you fix that jet yourself?"

". . . can try, but I'm no mech . . . ."

There was a sputter of static. The signal faded out.

"Hal from Rod. Over."

No answer.

"Hal, Hal, Hal! Hal Rogan from starship *Archangel.* Launch One from the *Archangel.* Anybody-at-all from Esperson. Answer me. Over."

Silence, save for faint cracklings from the loudspeaker.

"It's no use, Esp. Horizon's cut us off. We'll have to wait forty hours."

"Please, Skipper! Let me take a launch and—"

"Shut up! If you think I'm going to send any more men down there, you're nuts! At least not while we're out of communication with that point on the planet."

Esperson's voice went cold. "How will you enter it in the log?—'Left six men to die on 2794-II without bothering to investigate'."

"Maybe, maybe I will!" Isaacs snapped.

"Excuse me, Commander. I think I'll go back to my cabin." He started out.

"Wait."

"Okay?"

"I guess you're right. We've got to do something. We'll get out of this orbit and back up to get in communicator range again. Then you can take a launch down into the atmosphere. I'll go with you in fact—to make damn sure you don't land unless it's safe."

"Quinn has the reactors half-dismantled for thirty-day inspection, Skipper. It'll take a couple of hours to get started, then two or three more hours to jockey it back over Rogan's meridian."

"All right!" Isaacs snapped. "Five hours is better than forty, isn't it?"

"Sure, Boss. Thanks."

"You might as well get a launch ready. And pick eight big huskies to go with us. See that they take all the arms they can carry."

Esperson grinned and hurried away—to pack a crate of incendiary grenades. If the jungle proved a threat, he could always start a few forest fires.

Starships such as the *Archangel* were not built to do much maneuvering in strong gravitational fields. They were assembled in space, and they stayed in space; landings were accomplished by launch while the starship remained in an orbit about

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the planet. When the centrifugal force of the ship's curved course did not match the force of gravity for its orbit, continuous rocket-thrust and continuous piloting were needed to hold it in the desired position.

But after three hours, the site of Rogan's landing was back in communicator range. Isaacs tried several calls without result.

"He wouldn't be listening, Skipper," Rod offered. "He thinks we're out of range."

"Have you got the men ready?"

"They're waiting in the launch. It'll leave the ship pretty short handed."

Isaacs nodded, then jabbed the interphone button. "Allenby from Isaacs. Call me."

"Go ahead, Chief," grunted the speaker. "Allenby speaking."

"You'll be in command until we get back. Hold over the meridian as long as you can. Then build up orbital velocity again and hold it. We should be back before then, I'm sure."

"Check."

"One other thing. If we don't get back within eighty hours, go home."

"Do *what?*"

"Go home. Don't send another launch. You can't spare the manpower."

"I—I—"

"What's the matter?"

"Sir, would you mind writing out that order and signing it in the presence of two witnesses?"

Isaacs smiled sourly. "Sure, Al. We want to make sure the Commission doesn't blame you, if you have to go back without us. Don't we?"

"I—"

"Shut up."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll write out the order."

Minutes later, the belly of the *Archangel* groaned open, and the launch swung slowly out on grapples into the sun-glaring blackness. Esperson sat in the pilot's seat with Isaacs at his right, glaring down at the orb of the Nun. Eight men sat buckled in behind.

"Let 'er go."

The launch drifted slowly away as the grapples gave it a parting shove. Rod hit the turning jets, aimed the launch astern of the mother ship, and started the rockets. The skipper stared back at the *Archangel* as the small craft dove out of the orbit.

"Saying good-bye?" Rod grunted.

Isaacs muttered inaudibly and turned his gaze on the planet as the *Archangel* vanished above and behind them. It was night again on the mesa, but dawn would be approaching by the time they landed. Rod tried periodic calls, without rousing Rogan.

The disk grew until it blotted

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a third of space. The skipper touched his hand to his forehead and murmured weakly.

"What's wrong, Boss?"

"Headache."

Rod glanced back at the others. One man was clenching his head between his hands and shaking it violently. Another was pounding his temples with his palms. A third hugged his knees and looked sick. Rod frowned; he felt nothing.

As they entered the cloud blanket, Isaacs groped for a medical kit and swallowed two anti-nausea pills.

"Better pass 'em around, Skipper. You're not alone."

"Alone," he groaned. "That's the way I feel—like we're not alone."

"*Huh?* I mean the boys're sick too."

"Oh." He pitched the medical kit back to the huskies.

"Help any?"

"Not yet."

But half an hour later, he lifted his face out of his hands, straightened, and grinned.

"Feel better?"

"Yeah. That was a lulu! Felt like chickens pecking around in my head."

The others seemed similarly relieved.

"Skipper?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever bumped into any telepathic organisms?"

"Nah! Don't believe it's possible."

"What about those communicating plants on Beta Hydri Four?"

"What about 'em? Might be subterranean supersonics."

"Yeah—maybe."

"What are you getting at, Esperson?"

"Nothing. Nothing that won't take care of itself after awhile."

They fell silent. The mesa had grown to the size of a large coin on the radar screen when they broke through the bottom of the clouds.

"Migawd! It's not dawn yet, but you can see!" Isaacs gasped.

Rod peered uneasily at the gloomy but faintly glowing jungle. "Phosphorescence," he murmured. "Believe I can see well enough to land. Shall I try it, Skipper?"

"No. Circle awhile. Try to get Rogan on the communicator."

He tried for a time in vain. Then, after the fourth call . . . .

"Hello, Launch Two, thith ith Johnny Nine. Welcome to my little world." It was a high burbley voice, jovial yet strangely affected.

Goose flesh crawled along Esperson's sides. He shivered and glanced at the skipper. Isaacs stared moodily ahead.

Johnny Three, Johnny Six, Johnny Nine—what the devil! Esperson scowled.

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"Johnny from Launch, where's Rogan? Over."

"Athleep. They're all thleeping."

"How about Richards and Greeley and Elvin?"

"Thleeping too."

"Not missing?"

"Nobody ith mithing, thir."

"Then wake them up, will you?"

There was a pause. "It'th not their time to be awake, thir. I cannot." Then a sharp click.

"Hey there! Don't go off the air!" But it was too late.

He glanced at Isaacs again. The skipper made no emotional response at all to the conversation.

"Skipper, were you listening?"

"Yeah—I guess it was a joke after all. He said they were all sleeping."

"You believe it, huh?"

Isaacs shrugged, almost indifferently.

Rod circled the vicinity of the mesa until the underbelly of the clouds became gray with dawn, and the pale green phosphorescence of the jungle faded into gloomy morning. He stared at the landing site until he spotted the first launch.

"Skipper! Look at Launch One—lying on its *side!* And it's half covered by vines."

Isaacs peered for a time, then nodded. "Yeah."

"Doesn't bother you, huh?" Rod snapped irritably.

"Bother me? Yeah, I guess it does." His face remained impassive.

Rod glanced back at the others. Two of them were dozing. The others waited apathetically. No one seemed tense or nervous. Maybe *I'm* just out of guts, he thought irritably.

"Want to land now, Skipper?" he muttered, hoping for a negative answer.

"Sure. Might as well."

Twice he buzzed low over the plateau, hoping to see a human figure waving or signalling as he passed. He saw no one. The mesa was empty save for the vines and the toppled launch.

"Go ahead and land," Isaacs grumbled.

Rod growled a curse to himself, threw the ship into a vertical climb, adjusted the thrust to match the gravity, then lessened it by a small degree and watched the land float upward beneath them. The ship settled, scorched half-an-acre of vines, and rumbled down on its tripodal tail structure with scarcely a bounce. An automatic control blasted a white fan of fire-extinguishing vapor in a fifty-yard radius about the ship.

Rod waited for a moment until the dust and smoke had cleared, then looked around for crewmen

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from the first launch. The small tableland was still empty.

"Wonder where Johnny Whatsis went to?" he grumbled.

Isaacs was already out of his seat and heading for the airlock with the others following close behind. He called after them anxiously.

"Don't you think you better wait, Skipper, until—"

The smack and thud of the lock cut him off, and his ears crackled as the pressure changed abruptly. They had propped open the inner door and opened the outer. Rod shook his head and climbed out of the control seat. He tripped over a grenade-thrower and cursed. Half of them had forgotten their weapons. *What was wrong with them?* This was an alien world. They all knew better—especially Isaacs.

He picked up the grenade thrower and went to stand in the airlock, staring out across the mesa. The vines crawled everywhere, tangles of dark tendrils that lacked extensive foliage. The bodies of the dogs lay near the other ship, and he noticed that the vines had already grown in a tight net about them—as if seeking nourishment in the dead flesh. He shuddered as he saw the tip of a tendril move slowly upward and turn its tip in a slow circle, as if searching for the source of some external stimulus that it felt. It paused as it pointed in the general direction of the men who were now milling about the edge of the cliff.

Rod leaped down from the airlock and trod across the vines to where the other ship lay helpless. He prowled about it for a time, then opened the hatch and slipped inside. One look around the cabin chilled him. The instrument panels were wrecked, the rocket controls dismantled.

Clearly sabotage. But who—?

He heard someone climbing through the hatch.

"Nithe weather, ithn't it?" burbled a voice behind him.

Rod ducked low as he whirled and snatched reflexively at his sidearms. A small yelp escaped him, and his hair felt erect. Johnny Nine stood looking at the gun. He smiled blandly—a chubby fellow with tiny teeth and a skin whose texture suggested rosiness. But its actual color was gray, tinged with yellow-green. He seemed to be concentrating deeply for a moment. Then he shook his head.

"You aren't like the otherth, are you?" he said, and snickered.

Rod grunted and let the gun fall, but he kept it in hand.

"The retht of uth are different from you."

"What difference—?"

"I don't think you'll ever like thith plathe."

"I hate it—as of now!"

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"That *ith* unfortunate."

Something about Johnny revolted him. "Get out of the way!" he snarled, and started toward the airlock. When Johnny failed to move fast enough, he shoved him roughly aside. The plump man staggered, tripped, grabbed at a tuning unit as he fell. He yelped and peered at his hand, bleeding from a small cut. The blood was nearly black.

Sickened, Rod moved on. As he let himself down outside, there was a muffled explosion from the direction of the other ship, followed by hearty laughter. He stopped to stare. A wisp of smoke drifted from the other lock. Seven men stood in a half circle, grinning at it broadly.

"What's going on?" he bellowed in fright.

No one seemed to hear him.

He started toward the launch on a dead run. Another explosion —inside the ship—and it sounded like a grenade. More smoke from the lock. He cried out frantically as he ran. The vines tripped him and he sprawled headlong, cracking his head against a rock. He lay dazed for a moment, feeling gingerly around the dangerous spot in his skull where a piece of bone was missing, replaced by a thin silver plate. It seemed okay, but he felt dizzy.

Looking up, he saw Isaacs and another man emerge from the lock, sway slightly, and shake their heads as if recovering from shock. The men's grins disappeared; they seemed to come to their senses.

"Can anybody repair an instrument panel and an air pump?" the skipper bellowed. "We've got some trouble with the equipment!"

Rod groaned in horror and climbed weakly to his feet, shaking off a vine that had tightened about his ankle. He ran toward them again.

"Somebody's got to fix that stuff!" Isaacs pleaded.

"Migawd, Skipper!" Rod bellowed. "What happened? What did you do?"

Isaacs failed to answer, failed even to see or hear him. Rod grabbed the nearest crewman by the shoulder and shook him.

"Barnes! Tell me what happened."

Barnes rocked with the shaking, but seemed not to notice it. He was smiling dazedly at Isaacs, standing in the airlock.

"We *must* have an instrument-man out of nine men!" the skipper called plaintively.

"Obermann!" Rod roared. "You're an instrument-man! Speak up, damn it!"

Obermann ignored him. Rod pushed him forward. Obermann recovered his balance but failed to make a further response.

"Skipper!" Rod called, push-

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ing his way toward the lock. "Get away from the launch. Get everybody away. I can fix it."

". . . out of nine men," the skipper was saying.

"Ten men!" Rod roared. "Get out of the way!"

Isaacs ignored him completely. In rage, he caught the commander's ankle and jerked. Isaacs tumbled forward, fell four feet, and landed in a sprawled heap on the ground. He groaned slightly, then picked himself up indifferently, and addressed the men again.

"Well, then. I guess there's nothing to do but call the *Archangel* to send down a couple of repairmen."

Rod grunted a curse and kicked Isaacs in the seat of the pants. He sprawled again, but took no notice of the fact. Esperson was trembling. But he was never a man to deny the obvious, just because he lacked an explanation for it. The men refused to acknowledge his existence; he faced the fact, and the hell with immediate logic. He dived for the airlock and pulled himself inside.

The grenades had wrecked several panels and the airpump. There was no getting away until they were fixed. But no third launch was going to be called down from the *Archangel*! Of that he meant to make certain. He removed the power-amplifier tube from the communications transmitter and pocketed it, together with the three spares.

Isaacs re-entered the launch, bumped into him, stepped around him without recognizing his presence. Rod leaned against the wall and watched him try to use the set. When he failed, he went back outside.

"Any radiomen?"

There was no answer from the group.

Rod left the launch and watched them throng back across the mesa to the cliff where they wandered aimlessly, peering down at the jungle. He glanced toward Rogan's launch. Johnny Nine sat in the vines near it, watching the others. Rod stalked toward him, and stood a few feet away, automatic dangling in his hand. They stared at each other coolly. Johnny was holding his cut hand. The tip of a vine tendril was wound about his wrist and touched the cut as if it had grown fast there.

"What *are* you?"

"My name is Johnny Nine."

He paused. "What was Rogan's wife's maiden name?" he snapped.

"Alma Marne," said the dappled fat man.

The automatic twitched upward, then paused. It was just possible that Rogan had supplied him with that information

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in conversation. He needed to find something that Rogan certainly wouldn't have spread around voluntarily, something that Johnny wouldn't know, unless—

"What kind of operation was performed on Alma last earth-year?"

"Ah—her left breatht wath removed for canther."

Rod gritted his teeth and shot Johnny Nine in the belly. The shot blended with the scream. When he doubled forward, Rod shot him again in the top of the head. He slumped. The writhing response of the vines was immediate, but he had no time to watch. There was shouting from the clifftop, and a shot. The bullet sang past him and ricocheted from the hull of Launch One.

He ducked low and raced around behind the launch, then scurried for a low ridge. Another bullet struck the ground to his left and sprayed him with fragments of rock. He veered and dodged and made it across the ridge. The shots ceased. There were no sounds of pursuit. Evidently the awareness of his presence had been only temporary. He stopped, then crawled back to the top of the ridge. Isaacs and the others had gathered around Johnny, staring down in bewilderment.

Where was the source of the hypnotic delusion? Apparently Johnny had been only its focus. The jungle—the organismic jungle? Or something that lurked unseen therein? And what made him immune?

The only difference that recommended itself immediately was the silver plate in his skull. If telepathic transfer were possible, its medium would have to be some quantitatively measurable energy form, perhaps electromagnetic in character. And that silver plate—it might be like the electrostatic shielding around an electron tube.

He looked around, surveying the terrain behind him and beyond the ridge. It sloped down gently into the jungle. The mesa was shaped like the rock of Gibraltar, steep toward the south, but sloping northward.

As long as the others remained in a state of hypnotelepathic suggestibility, he dared not risk rejoining them. Whatever power controlled their actions might order his death, as it had ordered the sabotage of the ship. He eased himself down from the ridge and hurried down the slope toward the jungle—eerie and fetid. Its odor was funereal, like incense at a Mass for the dead. And it hissed wetly within itself, a slushy dripping sound.

As he walked along its edges, seeking a path around the mesa, the foliage and tendrils seemed

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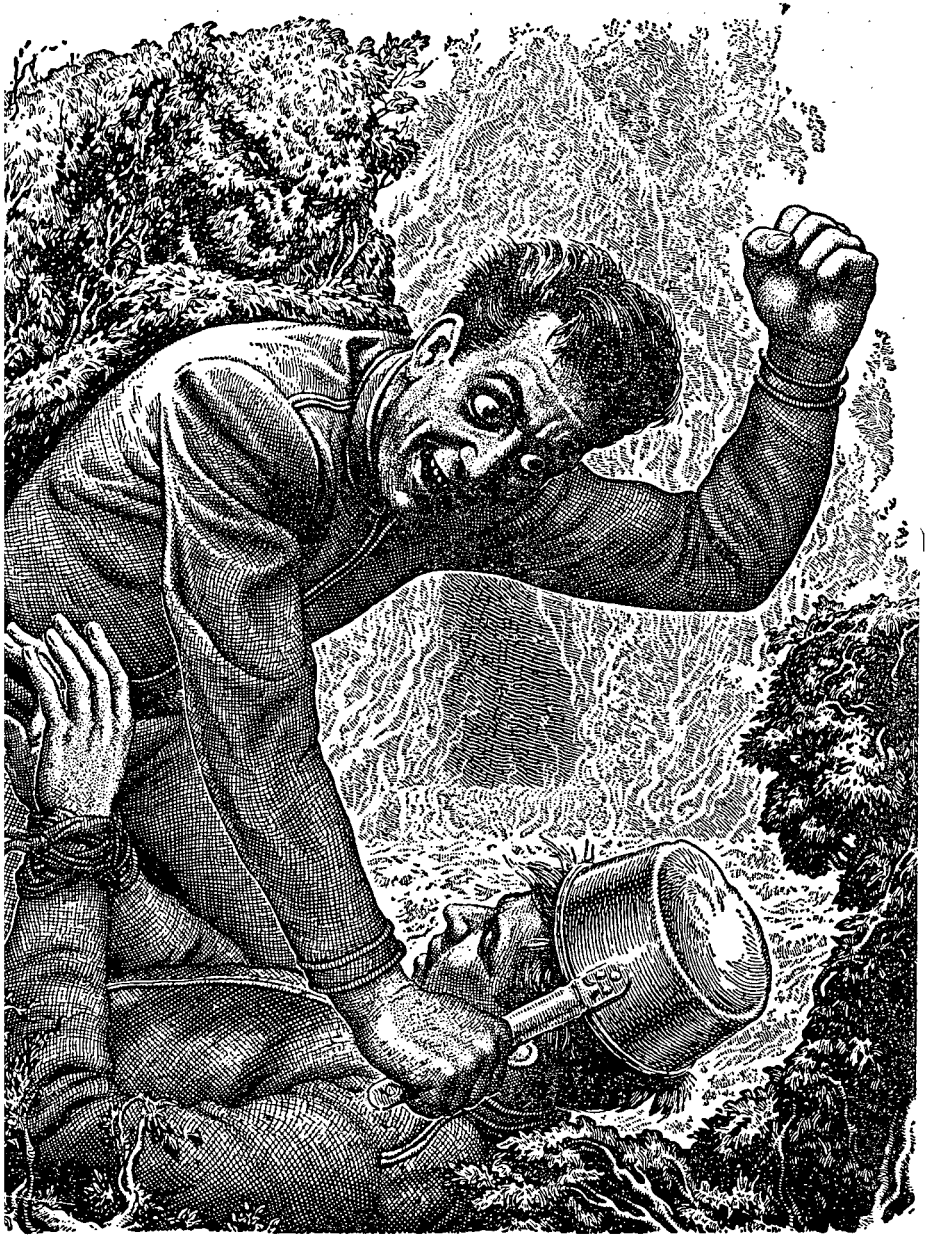

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to turn slowly, following him like a sunflower tracking the sun. He noticed that the vines had their origins about the roots of the trees; perhaps they were connected.

He followed the contour of the foot of the slope, wending his way around, and steering clear of the dense growth. A six-foot, orchid-like blossom followed his approach, and began to grow slowly out to block his path, supported by an arm-thick tendril. It faced him like the open jaws of a rattler, its petals thick and white, its throat an ugly crimson. He stopped. The thing inched toward him.

He shot it through the supporting tendril. The flower squeaked. The jaws snapped shut. It writhed back out of his path and threshed about in the brush. He passed several others like it as he moved ahead, but instead of trying to intercept, they withdrew deeper into the tangled growth. Some of them were closed—with bulges showing in their tendrils. The bulges varied in size, and one was large enough to suggest the possible fate of Rogan and the others.

Grimly, he moved on. The slope became a steep embankment, developed an overhang of rock. It began to rain. He stepped under the overhang to keep dry and stood studying the writhing jungle. There were pods dangling from the mesh of branches. They varied in size from a few inches in length to several feet, but all resembled gourds in shape. He chose the largest for a target and put a bullet through its fat bottom. It writhed and leaked yellow. It thudded and changed shape and wrestled within itself, as if something were trying to get out.

Then it split half open, and a hideous face peered wildly out. It shrieked its pain to the jungle. Then the fruit collapsed, and it fell thirty feet to crash in the brush where it lay whistling *kreee kreee kreee.*

Rod shivered. The thing had been a batlike creature with white membranous wings folded about its weak foetal body. After a time it fell silent in the brush. The rain continued.

A popping sound came from directly overhead. He looked up. A broken vine was swinging there, pendulumlike. Another broke while he stared. The vines were grown tightly around a large loose rock. With a startled shout he darted out into the rain. The vines were making a concerted effort to loosen the rock. He watched for several minutes until it thundered loose and crashed down where he had been standing.

He hurried away after growl-

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ing an enraged curse at the jungle. Half-an-hour later he rounded a rock and saw a cabin ahead. He approached warily, noticing the profusion of giant blossoms that grew about it. Some were open, others were closed—in various stages of what seemed to be a swallowing operation. As he drew nearer, he saw that the cabin was built of *living* stuff, a network of tightly woven vines and vegetable material that was still attached to the chartreuse jungle.

He paused doubtfully near the doorway, then entered the single room, wondering if the walls would suddenly writhe inward to crush him. But the movements in the jungle-stuff always seemed to be leisurely, probably accomplished by differential growth rather than by muscular action.

He sat near the doorway, just out of the rain, and stared up at the cliff-top.

I have no facts for analysis, he thought gloomily. There was no predictability about the situation because he lacked data concerning the life-form, its goals, whims, functions. What were the semantic reactions of a jungle? He could not even call it an intelligent jungle, without anthropomorphism. Its activities, however, seemed somehow related to intelligence.

While he watched the cliff-top a flying thing appeared, soaring high over the jungle, then out of sight over the mesa. Rogan once intimated that their function was that of insect-catcher, but they themselves seemed to have a vague structural relation to insect-forms, and perhaps to bats.

My goal is to get away from here, he thought. But he could not approach the mesa without exposing himself to the insane behavior of the others. Possibly the jungle might use them to kill him.

The flying thing reappeared suddenly, and Rod's belly twisted hard. The thing carried a man in its talons, and it seemed to be struggling to stay aloft. Once over the rim of the cliff, it swooped toward the jungle. Rod darted outside. The creature was bearing its burden down toward the cabin.

The huge wings beat a bass throbbing in the air. He plastered himself against the cliff and held the gun ready while he watched it. The man was Jeffers, and he appeared to be conscious but not struggling.

Kreee kreee kreee . . . .

Something moved in the brush near the cabin. A giant blossom stirred, then groped upward—like a young bird opening its maw to receive food. The winged creature dropped toward it. Its burden hung motionless, watching.

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Rod's gun barked. The blossom snapped closed, its stem writhing. The insect-bat cried out, then flapped higher with its burden, momentarily confused. Then without warning it dropped out of sight behind the cabin. There was a sickening *urp*. The creature flew upward—alone. Cursing angrily, Rod fired twice. The thing shrieked and crashed against the cliff. It lay at the edge of the brush, one wing twitching slightly. Vines moved slowly about it, seemed to attach themselves to the carcass.

Rod darted around the cabin. There was no sign of Jeffers. Several closed blossoms hung in the foliage, exhibiting various stages of digestion. One of them was still quivering, and it showed no bulge in its stem. Cursing angrily, he wrestled through the entangling foliage and attacked the fat stem with a knife. It proved itself tough as an oak-root. After inserting a fresh clip in his automatic, he cut it nearly through with five shots, wrestling against its slow serpentine movement as it tried to withdraw. He finished it with the knife, then tried to drag the closed blossom away. He tripped and fell headlong. Vines had grown tight about his legs.

He hacked them away with savage haste born of fright, and tugged the cumbersome blossom out into the clear space before the cabin where he began slicing at the tough, leathery hide that held Jeffers imprisoned. The man was not stirring.

At last he had it open, and Jeffers, still folded comfortably in a vaguely foetal position with his eyes closed, began to stir. He opened his eyes and looked around calmly. He picked himself up and blinked at his surroundings. He appeared completely unconcerned.

"Feel okay, Jeff?" Rod grunted.

The big man failed to answer. He stared along the rim of the jungle, saw a blossom that was open, and made a queer noise in his throat—like an infant gurgling. His big face beamed in a childish smile. He turned and lumbered toward the blossom.

Rod gave a desperate yelp, hit him from behind with a flying tackle, then clubbed him with the gun-butt. Jeffers had a thick skull. He remained stubbornly conscious, rolled over, kicked Esperson in the midsection. Rod went down groaning. Jeffers caught his ankles and began dragging him toward the eagerly waiting blossom, which had snaked toward them, tilting its jaws at a convenient angle.

Rod waited until Jeffers released his ankles to get a better grip; then he stabbed the possessed crewman in the thigh. Jeffers stumbled and crashed in the brush. Rod kicked the aware-

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ness out of him, and dragged him back to the clear space. Minutes later, he lay tightly trussed with strips of his own clothing.

Now what to do with him?

He sat down to think. The rain had stopped. The jungle was hissing. He was hungry, but he dared to eat nothing that was available short of the ship's provisions, and he could not reach the ship.

Intuition, strange process of unconscious association and abstraction, he felt its stirrings. Telepathic hypnosis—silver cranial section—screening—hunger—food—Johnny's cooking—pots and pans—metal—the problem of Jeffers—

He grunted suddenly, arose and stalked back inside the cabin. There in the corner was a small chemical heat-unit taken from the first launch. There also was a set of telescoping aluminum pots. The idea seemed too ridiculously easy and obvious, but so were most ideas of any value. He separated the pots, chose one about headsize, and went out to try it on Jeffers' recently assaulted skull.

After a little beating and shaping with the gun-butt, he made it a fair fit, punched a couple of holes, and tied it over Jeffers' cranium like a helmet. The man was groaning, but still not conscious. Rod sat down to wait.

The jungle had become a steam-world, vapor obscuring the cliff-top like a gray shroud. The only path of direct ascent and descent, without skirting the mesa, was a tangled ladder of vines. But one glance was enough to satisfy him that it was useless to him. The ladder was alive, certainly capable of pulling loose and collapsing when he was halfway up.

He thought of Johnny—and remembered what Rogan said about insect catchers, and a single animal that lived in the jungle. Evidently Johnny was the animal, living in symbiosis with the single vegetable form. Johnny Three at first—and Six made nine. And ten made nineteen, if the creature could manage it.

Had the jungle itself devoured the original lost crewmen—and given birth to a complex organism built as a composite synthesis of the three? Such speculation was pure guesswork, involving undefined terms, and perhaps meaningless formulations. Still, lacking facts, he pursued it. Were nine men still somehow alive in Johnny? That was nonsense, for consciousness changed, moment by moment, so that Yesterday's Esperson was not the same man as Today's Esperson, but bound to his past-person only by memory of experience.

The only faintly reasonable

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hypothesis that he could formulate was that in consuming an animal organism, the jungle so completely analyzed its microstructure that it even understood the significance of patterns imbedded in the tissue, comprehending the bio-chemistry of memory and consciousness, so that it could duplicate portions of the psychophysiological structure, the duplication implying a similarity of consciousness and function. Facts were too scarce for such guesswork. But he urgently needed some sort of hypothesis as a tentative guide for action.

Jeffers began to come awake. He stirred in his bonds and moaned. His eyes fluttered open and groped for something to cling to. They found the jungle, and the moan became a gurgle of fright.

"Jeff! Snap to!"

The eyes found Rod. Saneness returned slowly. He muttered a foul oath and it seemed to restore his confidence. He strained at his bonds, choked, and reddened angrily.

"How about it, Jeff!" Rod snapped.

"Huh? Get me out of this mess!" the man growled.

"You know where you are and what happened?"

The struggling subsided. He looked around again, saw the jungle-flowers and shuddered.

"Some kind of damn dream!"

"Uh-uh, pal. You did it."

Jeffers shook his head. His mind refused the datum.

"I couldn't!"

"You could and did. If you didn't, how would I know what you dreamed?"

"Huh?"

"About the—flying thing and the flower."

His expression went wild again. He struggled. His helplessness seemed to induce nausea. He closed his eyes and fell back in a state of shock.

"Start telling me what happened!" Rod demanded, shaking him hard.

"Huh?"

"What went on inside you? Damn it, we've got to get facts."

Jeffers shuddered. "I can't."

"You can, and bigawd you *will!* If you want to live. What's the matter? Memories too nasty?"

"Jeez!" Jeffers shuddered, clenched his eyes closed, and began babbling disjointed nonsense—phrases and impressions and ugly memory images, like a man in narco-hypnosis.

Rod listened carefully, occasionally encouraging him with a brief utterance of attention. The babble made a little sense, by reason of its content.

". . . a big soft smother, all wet . . . giant came angry and rough . . . need hungry poison

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. . . roared and ruins me with sharp thing . . . soggy strangle . . . hurts because I wanted hurts . . . ."

Rod frowned thoughtfully. The man had been only half-aware of his surroundings during the possession. His thoughts had been infantile, and controlled apparently by a force that caused the things that he perceived to appear identical to memory images from other ages of his life. The blossom—it became a mother, affectionately nuzzling an infant, murmuring, cooing: "I could just eat you *up!*" The perceptions became more than symbols, became identities—while somehow the whole man remained externally rational.

He was too absorbed in listening to the disjointed babble, and he failed to hear the thing come down the ladder of vines behind him—until it walked across the clearing and spoke.

"Pleathe don't move, Ethperthon."

He stiffened. *"Johnny!"*

"I have a gun aimed at your back. Turn around thlowly."

Rod turned rapidly—with a snarl. The chubby man retreated a step, and the gun moved threateningly. He showed no ill effects for having been shot through abdomen and skull. What the jungle created, it could restore. He started to his feet.

"Behave aggrethively, and you die, Lieutenant. Cooperate, and you live—forever." His large eyes were fanatic green pools of determination.

He hesitated. "What do you want me to do?"

"Firtht—lift Jefferth into—the Flower." He said "Flower" as a mystic might say "Gate of Heaven."

Rod stared at him distastefully and spat. He glanced up at the fog shrouding the cliff-top. "And then climb in one myself, I guess, huh?"

"Yeth. That followth."

"Why? Why do you want it? Why does—the jungle want it?"

Johnny paused, frowning impatiently. "How elth could we know what you know?"

So that was it! The jungle learned by ingestion, gathered information through its feeding process. Its books were organisms, full of memory-images and learned data—and the jungle was literally hungry for knowledge, and perhaps for the memory-experiences of the devoured animal.

"You don't want Jeffers," he said. "Everything *he* knows is wrong."

The big man mumbled on the ground.

"Lift him into the Flower, Lieutenant!" Johnny snapped.

"Wait! We can make some kind of a —"

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"There'th no *need* for a deal. I have the gun."

"But there's a way you can have your cake—"

"And eat it too?" The chartreuse-gray composite smiled wryly. "Exactly what we *are* doing, Lieutenant! Now Jefferth, pleathe."

Grimly resigned, to all external appearances, Rod knelt beside Jeffers and reached for the knife.

"Leave him tied!" Johnny ordered.

"I can't lift him. I'll have to cut his feet loose."

"Very well, but not hith handth."

Jeffers was cursing fluently. When his feet were free, he kicked out savagely, and his boot grazed Rod's skull. The lieutenant sprawled away, clutching his head and moaning, hoping that Rogan's knowledge of the silver plate had been transferred to Johnny.

"Get up, Lieutenant."

Rod collapsed, feigning a dead faint. After a moment, he heard Jeffers come to his feet and start running. A shot exploded. Jeffers howled. Rod opened his eyes. Jeffers was sitting a dozen yards away, looking dazed. His leg was bleeding, and the helmet had been torn from his head. He tried to get up, but the leg collapsed. Johnny started toward him. Rod reached quietly for his gun, which he had dropped when Johnny stole up behind him.

He took careful aim; the gun bucked in his hand. The creature of the jungle sprawled, with the top of his head gone.

Rod darted forward and clamped the battered pot back over Jeffers' head. "Did it get you again?" he panted.

"Starting to," the wounded man wheezed.

Rod freed his hands and glanced at the wound. The thigh muscles were torn badly but the bone not broken. He applied a belt as a tourniquet. "Think you can walk with help?"

"Where?"

"Back around the mesa. It'll be dark soon. We'll have to get back in the launch without the others seeing us."

"I guess I can walk." Jeffers stood up, whitened and swayed, but remained standing.

"One thing to take care of first," Rod growled. He strode to the fallen Johnny. The wandering vines were already creeping into an exploring knot about the shattered skull. He hit the pin from an incendiary grenade, tucked it under Johnny's neck, and backed away. Five seconds later, a blinding blue-white light peeped out, lingered and grew, spewing sickening smoke. If the jungle wanted Johnny fixed, she'd have to make a new one. There wouldn't be much left to repair.

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Twilight was fading into darkness when they reached the north slope, and Jeffers was near collapse. They paused to rest, peering up at the ridge, half expecting a demon-possessed posse led by Isaacs to come charging down upon them. But the blackness of night stole over them, and there was no sign of activity from the mesa.

"How many guys were left up there when that, that bat-thing picked you up? Can you remember?"

Jeffers tried to think. "Let's see —I think—we started with nine, didn't we?"

"Ten, Pal—you're still affected."

"Ten—that's right. Well, I believe there were—four left."

Rod groaned. "There may not be any now." He climbed to his feet and helped the wounded Jeffers up. They moved slowly and quietly up the ridge. Giant wings drummed somewhere above them in the blackness, tracking their movements with some strange sense. The jungle still watched, threatened, brooded in sullen, hungry anger.

They reached the crest of the ridge, but only blackness lay ahead. Rod heaved another grenade to light the mesa, and watched its gleaming flare illuminate emptiness. Nothing but the launches remained.

"Maybe they're in one of the ships."

"Don't think so," Jeffers grunted. "That damn—whatever it is—can't get hold of you as well through the hull."

After thinking about it for a moment, Rod decided that it was peculiar that the hypnotic effect could reach through the hull at all. But obviously it had, to some extent. Perhaps the shielding effect of metal depended on closeness of fit.

They advanced warily across the vine-covered ground, expecting ambush. They stole close to Launch Two, listened at the airlock, heard nothing. Rod dragged himself quietly inside

"Nobody here."

They tried the other launch with similar result.

"We're alone, Jeffers."

The crewman was near collapse. Rod helped him into Launch Two, found a medical kit, and dressed the leg-wound. He spent the rest of the night working on the launch, using the other ship as a parts bank. When the communicator was repaired, he tried calling the *Archangel*—with no results. The starship's orbit had evidently carried it below the horizon again.

The repairs were nearly complete, but fatigue compelled him to pause for food and sleep. He made certain that the airlock was

(Continued on page 156)

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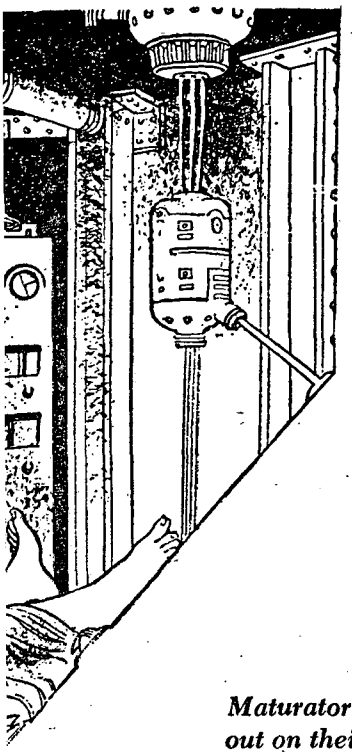

By JOSEPH SHALLIT

Illustrator: EMSH

WONDER CHILD

While working on this story, Joseph Shallit (formerly a journalist, now a successful writer of mystery novels) was suffering, as he put it, "the agonies of anticipated parenthood, the imagined horrors of diaper-changing," and all the rest of it. So, as an occasional writer of science fiction, he naturally began wondering if science couldn't provide some short cut to parental happiness, something like Dr. Elliott's Maturator—which Roy and Phyllis Crowley tried out on their unborn child. However, when little Donald Lee Crowley finally arrived, he turned out to be a wonder all right—but in a sense that his parents would never understand—until it was too late!

WHY don't you two break down and have yourselves a baby?" Dr. Elliott said.

Roy Crowley pulled his pipe out of his mouth so that he could properly grimace at the little psychologist. "Aren't you tired of that line?" he said. And from the corner of the living room came Phyllis's voice: "Throw that guy out of here."

"Let's be serious about this," Elliott said. "If you let this go much longer, the choice will be out of your hands—you won't be able to have a child."

"Uh-huh," Phyllis Crowley said. She was nested deep in a big upholstered chair, a sketch pad on her lap. She was making a pencil drawing of Moki, the black-and-white cat, which at the

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moment was curled up on the Magnavox.

"Hear that?" Roy Crowley grinned. "That ought to settle it. You can't have a baby if the wife is unwilling—and the husband is against it."

Elliott, a ruddy, round-faced, small-featured man, shook his head impatiently. "You can talk yourselves into it."

"Why?" Roy uncrossed his legs, stretched them out languidly and slumped back in his chair. "Why should we? I'm a writer. Phyllis is an artist. We both have plenty to keep us busy—a full day every day. We resent any little thing that steals our time. What's the point of adding another time-stealer to the house?"

"That's certainly a narrow attitude—"

"It certainly is," Roy said comfortably. "And we make no apologies for it. Why don't you have a baby yourself and stop bothering us?"

"I—" Elliott waved the question away—"some people are designed to be bachelors. That's beside the point. I'm talking about you. Perfect parents. The father tall, full-chested, intelligent. The mother—"

"Cut it out," Phyllis said.

"It's a fact," Elliott said. "All the chances are in favor of fine offspring."

"Look—don't misunderstand me—I'd love a fine offspring," Roy said. "If we could get him ready-made. I mean, finished enough to ship him off to school. But we're not going to let ourselves in for that drawn-out, miserable ordeal of sterilizing bottles, 2 a.m. feedings, toilet training. Lord, we wouldn't go through that for anything. Just can't afford the time. We've got lots more interesting things to do."

Elliott settled his pudgy body against the back of the chair, as if this was the point he'd been waiting for. "That period can be speeded up," he said softly.

"Speeded up? How?"

Elliott half closed his eyes. "Take my word for it. It can be speeded up. Not eliminated, of course. But accelerated enormously."

Roy made a skeptical throat-clearing noise. "What're you talking about, you phony brain carpenter? You mean to say you can cut down the diaper time?"

"Right. You happen to have picked the homeliest aspect possible, but all right—you have a limited imagination. I'm thinking not only of diaper time, but motor skills, language ability, socialization, and so on."

"You mean you can speed all that up?" Roy said, and without giving Elliott a chance to answer, "I don't believe it."

"I didn't think you would," Elliott said blandly. "I want you to come to my office and let me

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prove to you that it *can* be done."

"How?" Phyllis demanded from her corner. "How could you prove it?"

"Come and see. Tomorrow evening?"

Phyllis stood up out of her chair and fluffed out her orange dirndl. She was a slim, lithe, boyish figure, topped with dusty blonde hair cut in poodle style. "What are you trying to sell us, Doc?" she said.

"I want the two of you to come around tomorrow evening. I'll have the demonstration ready for you."

"Sorry," said Roy. "You're not going to finagle us into parenthood with any charts and graphs."

Phyllis gazed across the room at the psychologist. "What kind of demonstration do you mean?" she said quietly.

It was a large, well-lighted office, with pleasant pale green walls. Phyllis and Roy had seen it many times on social visits—Elliott's apartment was on the floor above—and every time they came they noticed some new gadget in it. Elliott, though an M.D. and specialist in pediatrics, had been drifting away from purely medical practice and concentrating more and more on psychological problems such as stammering and reading defects. He was constantly buying or developing new testing-and-training devices, but the gadget the Crowleys saw now was really a whopper.

It was about five feet high, and the width and length of a double bed. In fact, there was a leather couch inside it. At the four corners rose heavy black steel supports, suspending between them a squat, cylindrical affair roughly resembling an aerial camera. At one side, between two of the steel supports, was some sort of control panel.

"This is my darling," Elliott said, standing beside the machine and smiling with all the shyness of a new bridegroom. "You're looking at three years' work."

"Wonderful," said Roy. "What's it do—make waffles?"

"I'll show you what it does," Elliott said. He went through a door into the adjoining room, a classroom where he trained his reading cases, and came back with a gray kitten in his arms.

"Oh, isn't it darling!" said Phyllis, her hands reaching out for it.

"Yes, hold it a moment," Elliott said. "Notice, please, that this is a very young kitten—two and a half weeks old, to be exact."

He went out another door, into a washroom, and this time came back with a small cage. A white mouse scampered frantically inside.

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Phyllis, cuddling the kitten, let out a squeak of protest. "All right now," Elliott said briskly, "let the kitten down on the floor and watch closely. Watch what it does."

He stooped and opened the cage door. The mouse didn't seem to recognize its freedom, and Elliott prodded it with his fountain pen until the mouse ran out on the green linoleum.

With a bound the kitten was after it. The chase went to the far corner of the room. It was over in a moment. The kitten's jaws snapped audibly. Phyllis moaned weakly and turned her face away, and the kitten came trotting across the floor with the limp white fur dangling from its teeth.

"Good boy," Elliott said. He scooped up the kitten, wrested the victim from its mouth and got rid of it in the washroom in some unseen way. He came back smiling. "What do you think of that kitten, eh?"

Phyllis's shoulders turned up, shuddering. "I think it's horrible."

"You've just seen a remarkable thing, though you don't seem to know it. You never saw a two-and-a-half week kitten run like that before. It ran like a full-grown cat. And most important, did you see the finesse with which it snapped—"

"Please!" Phyllis protested.

"Like any adult cat," Elliott said proudly.

"Hey," Roy broke in, "what's all this got to do with what you brought us here for?"

"That's exactly what I'm coming to," Elliott said amiably. He lowered his round little body into a leather chair across the room from them. "Listen." He brought a cigar out of his breast pocket and bit the tip off zestfully and worked up a big flame before he continued.

"If I asked you why a kitten kills a mouse, you'd probably say it's instinct. Wrong. There's no such instinct. The only thing that's inborn in the cat is a tendency to jump on small moving objects. That's all. It's a vague, generalized reaction. The specific technique of killing a mouse has to be *learned*. Most kittens learn it by watching the mother cat do it. Kittens who've never seen it done are likely never to become mousers. Some do, but they have quite a time before they learn the process themselves by trial and error. This, incidentally, isn't any theory of mine—it's been proven experimentally.

"Anyway, what I'm getting at is that this little kitten, which never saw a cat kill a mouse, simply pranced across the floor and assassinated a mouse the first time it saw one. That was a week ago. The kitten was just ten days

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old at the time. It fumbled a little on that first try, but only for nine or ten seconds; that was all the time it needed to figure it out. Who helped it learn that fast?" He blew out a big puff of smoke. "I did."

Roy and Phyllis gaped at each other. They burst into simultaneous laughter. "This I've got to see!" Roy howled. "Doc Elliott demonstrating how to catch a mouse."

"Please, please!" Elliott looked very pained. "I'm telling you about one of the most remarkable achievements in the whole range of animal psychology, and you make silly jokes! Now listen carefully, will you, please? This kitten's precociousness is all due to that machine, that handsome-looking thing in the corner. I call it the Maturator: Tentative name, but it gives you the idea. Before this kitten was born—during the final two weeks of its fetal life—its mother spent an hour each day anesthetized on that couch, with that bomb-shaped mechanism pressed to the spot in the abdomen where the kitten's head was. I determined that by fluoroscopy, of course. From the moment of birth, this kitten has been ahead of its litter mates in learning ability and agility. It has kept its lead, even increased it, day by day. Today it's roughly a month ahead of the others.

"The implications for us are obvious. If we do this for a human infant, it will go through stages that normally take months, in weeks. It should be out of the suckling stage in two, three weeks—walking in a couple of months—talking shortly after that. . . . Fantastic, isn't it?"

Roy stared at him silently. He could sense the taut wonder of Phyllis, close beside him. "You think I'd ever let her inside that crazy torture machine?" he growled.

Elliott raised his pale eyebrows daintily. "You're using pretty strong language about something you know nothing about, young man. Actually, no pain is felt at all. The only reason I anesthetized the cat was to keep it still. There's nothing mysterious or uncanny about this machine. The heart of it is merely a kind of induction coil. Basically, all it does is induce potentials in nerve fibers. Simple enough?"

"Sure," said Roy. "I don't get it," he added.

"Naturally. But stick with me. What gave me the whole idea was this: research over the last few years on human fetuses that had to be removed operatively has shown that the unborn child's nervous system is amazingly well developed at a very early age. By the end of the fourth month after conception,

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all the brain and nerve cells it will ever have are already formed. Not all operating, of course, but they're there. At fourteen weeks, the fetus can swallow. At sixteen weeks, it's already making breathing movements, though not actually breathing, since it's in a liquid medium. At eighteen weeks, it's opening and closing its hands. By the end of the sixth month, it's capable of sucking. These are all complicated things to do—many muscles and nerves involved.

"How did the fetus learn them? Instinct, you'll say. But that doesn't really tell us anything. Consider the act of sucking. Personally, I don't see any basic difference between sucking and an activity like whistling. What's the difference, actually? You'll probably say sucking is an instinctive action, while whistling is a learned action. But that's merely playing with words. The term 'instinct' doesn't mean anything really; it just confuses things. The only real difference between sucking and whistling is that the child learns the first before it's born and the second after it's born. The nerve tracts, the pathways needed for the act of whistling, are all there long, before the child is born. They're not activated—not plugged in, so to speak. Well, that's where this machine comes in."

Elliott heaved up out of his chair and trundled his little keg-shaped body to the machine in the corner. "This bomb-shaped mechanism in the center is a device that induces electrical potentials in objects brought near it. As you probably know—or perhaps you don't—such induction devices create a large magnetic field, extending indefinitely. My contribution is mainly a way of concentrating the field down to microscopic size. As a result, I can so direct it that the field affects only a few nerves at a time. I can pick and choose the nerves I want to activate.

"The rest ought to be obvious. The unborn infant's brain has all its nerve cells—an estimated nine billion—but most of them aren't plugged in yet. There's resistance at the plugs—the synapses, we call them. Very well. This machine of mine overcomes the synaptic resistance. It induces a current in a nerve—an impulse—that shoots across the synapse into the end-fibers of the next nerve. Once that pathway is opened up, it's in business—it's there for good.

"To get a better idea of what I mean, consider how you learned to ride a bike. You practiced and got discouraged and practiced some more, until finally you broke through the synaptic resistances and established new pathways. Once you did that, ev-

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erything came easy. Even if you discontinued bicycling and tried it again five years later, you found you got over your rustiness in a few minutes and were able to coast along as well as ever. Why? Because once those nerve pathways were established, they were there for good, always ready for you to use them.

"Well, that's what I do for the baby by my artificial method. I stimulate selected nerves into forming pathways. When the child is born and has to learn things, the pathways are already there. No laborious practice is necessary. Just a few trials, and it's coasting along. It's really wonderful. I wish somebody had done it to me in my prenatal days."

"Somebody should have done *something* to you, anyway," Roy said.

Elliott wrinkled his little round face at him. "What're you whining about?"

"You have the gall to expect people to let you monkey around with their kids like that? Suppose you addle the kid's brain?"

"Impossible." Elliott closed his thin lips firmly. "I'm not changing a single brain cell. All I'm doing is activating some pathways that are dormant—waiting."

"Tell me something," Phyllis said. "Isn't it awfully complicated in there. All those brain cells and things. How do you know which one to—to give a push to?"

"Good question." Elliott glowed at her gratefully. "An awful lot of work's been done these last few years on localization of cerebral functions, both in animals and humans. They've really got things down to fine points. For example, they have the speech center so precisely identified that by electrically stimulating that part of the brain during surgery, they can actually make the larynx give out sounds, practically talk. But with all this wealth of new knowledge, nobody has made any practical use of it in a developmental way. Until Elliott came along."

"And you've already tried this out on some babies?" Roy asked.

"No. The first will be yours."

"Whose?"

"The lucky Crowleys will be the first in history to have all the pleasure of bringing up their child without fuss or trouble."

"Doc, somebody else'll have to make history," Roy said. "It's not our line. Right, Phyllis?"

She didn't seem to hear. "Doc," she said, "tell us some more. . . ."

There was a long silence in the car as Roy and Phyllis drove home. Finally he said, "I never knew you wanted a baby."

"You never asked," she said quietly.

"But you always derided the idea," he protested.

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"That was only because you were against it."

"But I never was against it. I always thought you were. You always were afraid of anything that would interfere with our careers—"

"Apparently that won't happen now with the Doc's new system."

"Well, I've always been in favor of a baby."

"Then won't you tell me so now, please?"

It was an easy birth. The obstetrician used little anesthesia—just nitrous oxide in small dosage. He wanted to use more, but Elliott talked Phyllis into standing the extra pain. He was afraid deep anesthesia might block off some of the pathways he had opened. "No use taking a chance," he told her, "after all the trouble we've gone to."

She had visited his office daily during the last three months and spent an hour under the machine each time. She had read or sketched; she hadn't minded it at all. "Like going to the hairdresser's," she had said.

The baby was a boy, pure cornsilk blond, blue-eyed, eight and one-half pounds, husky, well-shaped. They named it Donald Lee Crowley. Elliott came to crow over it, and Roy practically had to eject him from Phyllis's room when nursing time came. "God-dammit, you think you're the father?" Roy howled at him. "If I catch you handing out cigars—!"

"I've put in a lot of time and expense on this project," Elliott said huffily. "I don't want to see it spoiled by a bungling busybody like you."

They didn't say a word to the obstetrician about the treatments Phyllis had been given, and he didn't seem to notice anything unusual. Donald squawled, just like other infants. He yawned and sneezed. He regurgitated. He swallowed air and had to be burped. And he dripped like a broken faucet.

"Hey," Roy shouted at Elliott over the phone. "What's the deal? We going to have this yowling and dripping indefinitely? Phyllis and the baby are going home day after tomorrow, and we haven't seen a damn thing yet."

"Be patient—"

"Patient? I'll break your greasy little neck. Didn't you promise we wouldn't have any trouble? Do I have to spend my nights now walking a yowling baby and getting drenched down my front?"

"All right," Elliott said calmly. "I went easy on the motor association area, but if you're so all-fired impatient, I'll reinforce those pathways. Bring the baby here when you leave the hospital. I'll give it three solid hours in

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the Maturator. That ought to speed things up for you, if that's what you want."

"If that's what I want? Holy hell, man, don't you believe in doing a job right? You got us into this—get us out of it."

On the tenth day, Roy brought Phyllis and Donald home, stopping en route at Elliott's place for the treatment. The next day, Elliott came calling. He had a wire recorder with him. "I'm going to leave this in the baby's room. Turn it on when he's especially vocal. I think the speech development will give us our most significant record. I really put some juice into Broca's area, the speech center."

He bent over the crib and tickled Donald's middle. "Say! You notice something? Notice how he lies, with his arms almost straight out?"

"Is that unusual?" Phyllis said.

"Sure is. Babies lie fairly continuously in the fetal posture, arms flexed and hands near the face, until about four weeks. This child's not even two."

"You mean that everything's going to—?"

"Let's keep our fingers crossed—but it looks good," Elliott bragged. "It looks good."

When Elliott came around again, after a lapse of three days, Roy left his typewriter and came downstairs to greet him. "Doc, I've got to give you credit. Things are easing up—the kid's crying less and less. Hardly even cries when he's hungry. It's getting to be livable around here again."

The pudgy red face puffed up ecstatically. "I told you! I told you!" He turned with a bird-like dart of his head to Phyllis. "What does he do when he's hungry—just fuss around?"

"That's right," Phyllis said. "Just sort of squirms around and makes little noises, as if he's talking to himself."

"Won-derful! You know what that means? The eight-week level, at least! My God, this is even better than I anticipated. The eight-week level at two weeks!"

He followed them into the nursery. "What kind of sounds does he make?"

"Well," Phyllis reflected, "sort of cooing."

"Cooing!" Elliott sounded as if he were cooing himself. "You have it recorded?"

"I think so."

He listened to the machine play back the baby's vocalizations. "Definitely cooing," he said. "That's eight weeks. Yes, sir, eight weeks minimum."

"When," said Phyllis hesitantly, "when do you think we can start . . . toilet training?"

"At this rate of acceleration, I'd say in another ten days."

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"You're not kidding?"

"Ten days," Elliott said firmly.

During the succeeding week, the third of Donnie's life, the following events took place, to the accompaniment of Elliott's mounting excitement: the baby developed good head balance; he clutched a toy; when shown his face in the mirror, he smiled and patted it; he said something that sounded like "ma" ("six-month level!" Elliott shouted).

During the fourth week of Donnie's life, he got up to two-syllable words—mama and dada—learned to wave bye-bye and even to say it, responded to his name, learned to play pat-a-cake. In the middle of this week, Phyllis introduced him to the mysteries of the pot. By the end of the following week, he had mastered it.

There was enormous jubilation in the Crowley household when this was accomplished. Roy broke out the bottle of Napoleon brandy. He and Phyllis got pretty high. They even gave Donnie a lick of it. He beamed his pleasure and said "moh moh," but they didn't let him have any more. They didn't want a dipso in the family.

At the age of six weeks, Donnie Crowley was dressing himself—everything but tying the shoelaces—handling his own spoon at table, keeping himself busy with toys. Phyllis was able to get in four hours of painting a day. Roy was at his typewriter almost without hindrance. It was a happy household.

In fact, the only source of difficulty was the neighbors. They were too curious; they noticed things; they asked questions. Neither Roy nor Phyllis wanted to tell anybody about the business with the Maturator. They were uncomfortable about it; they vaguely felt it would be almost like confessing some other man had fathered the child.

But what could they do when the neighbors dropped in and found Donnie at the table feeding himself? You could see their suspicions. What kind of baby was this? Some sort of freak? It couldn't be six weeks old. Maybe the Crowleys had lost their baby and adopted an older one and were trying to palm it off as their own. *Something* was funny. . . .

Donnie happened to be somewhat big for his age; not extraordinarily so, but noticeably above average. How old? the neighbors would repeat slyly. How old did you say? It was very uncomfortable. Particularly since Roy and Phyllis were always self-conscious about the story they were concealing. The neighbors could sense their feeling of guiltiness. It was a complication that Roy and Phyllis

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had never anticipated. They found themselves forced to act cold to their favorite neighbors in order to discourage visits. Every marvelous new progression in Donnie's development was a cause for anxiety: suppose the neighbors noticed. The gossip going around was unimaginable. Roy and Phyllis felt as if they were living in some frontier outpost, surrounded by enemies, spies and traitors.

By the time Donnie reached his first birthday, the Crowleys had managed to alienate every one of their neighbors. Phyllis arranged a party—a wistful affair—just the three of them and a little cake with one candle. There were still a few friends who would have brought their children, but Roy and Phyllis were too afraid to invite them. The experience of watching Donnie for three or four hours would have been too staggering. The guests would have seen a one-year-old boy who used phrases like "What is that?" and "I don't like it" with precise enunciation; who could walk, run and climb; who could even get somewhere with an erector set.

Elliott came around the next day with congratulations and a gift book—*Bobbie and Janie at the Fair*—which was listed for the three- and four-year level.

"It's time you started a little socialization," he said. "Kid's got to start playing with the neighbors' kids."

"Oh, no," Phyllis whimpered.

"Got to. Don't you want the child to develop properly?"

"It won't work out. The neighbors all think Donnie's queer."

"The devil with what they think. I'm not interested in them. I'm interested in seeing that Donald develops to his full potentialities. You'd better start letting him out in the garden to play with the other kids. Better start right away."

"But you don't know. . . ." Phyllis said.

He didn't. The thing fizzled from the very start. When Donnie came out to play, it promptly became meal time or nap time for the neighbors' kids. Or else little Jimmie was sick—bad cold—certainly wouldn't want your Donnie to catch it. Phyllis tried bravely to overcome the neighbors' resistance, but after two weeks of continuous rebuffs, she gave up, limp and disheartened. Donnie sat in the living room and plaintively asked where Jimmie and Billie were—he wanted to play with Jimmie and Billie. Phyllis couldn't work up any satisfactory answer. She had to spend more and more of her time playing with him, keeping him busy. Her time at the easel was cut down to hardly more than an hour a day. She took to painting

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at night, after Donnie went to sleep; but she had always been accustomed to painting by daylight, and the electric light drove her mad.

"Roy," she wailed, "how did we ever get into this? It's killing me—I haven't turned out a decent painting in months."

"It's knocking hell out of my writing, too," Roy said. "God, this never occurred to me at all. I thought if he matured early, he'd use up less of our time. It's worked exactly the other way around."

"What're we going to do?"

"I don't know. Say! Wait a minute. How about a nursery school? Sure. Why don't we enroll him in there?"

Phyllis shook her head miserably. "They don't take one-year-olds."

"Who says he's one year old? He's three. They won't ask for his birth certificate. Maybe he's a little small for three—but not very much so, at that. Put him in with three-year-olds and he'll be right where he belongs—get along fine."

Next morning Roy drove Donnie to the Hopewell Nursery School, on the other side of town. He scanned the names of the parents of the children enrolled, and didn't spot any he knew. Fine. "Donnie's three," he told the registrar without a quiver.

It was a brilliant idea, as Phyllis conceded on the second day. Donnie loved the place. He got along splendidly with the other children. He was full of talk when he came home at noon—full of Jerry and Tommy and Mary and Nancy. Miss Lawson, the supervisor, reported he was a model child. If the Crowleys would like to enroll Donnie in the afternoon session as well as the morning one, with lunch at the school, she thought the child was quite mature enough to stand the long absence from home.

They tried it. It worked out fine. The Crowley house was a peaceful, noiseless haven from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. every day except Sunday. Donnie was drawing pictures now. After his first week at the school, he was promoted to the drawing class for specially gifted four- and five-year-olds. In another week, he was making sketches which Miss Lawson thought were remarkable representations of human and animal figures. "Of course," she said to Phyllis, "I'm sure Mrs. Crowley must give him lots of coaching."

"Uhm-uhm," Phyllis mumbled. She had never shown him how to draw a line. The boy had picked it all up in his few sessions in the drawing class. The pictures *were* pretty remarkable for a three-year-old. But Donnie was only a little over one!

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"Roy," said Phyllis awesomely, "we've got a prodigy on our hands."

"I don't think so," Roy said. "He's ahead of his age—we know that—but it'll all even out as he gets older."

One afternoon, the phone jangled and an excited Miss Lawson was on the phone. They'd have to come for Donnie, they'd have to come for him right this minute. Did they understand? The boy was unfit to associate with decent children. If that was the way Mrs. Crowley brought up her child—!

Roy drove to the school and managed to extract the story from the incoherent Miss Lawson. Donnie had been making what Miss Lawson considered pornographic sketches. Roy got a look at them. One, he could see at once, represented himself taking a shower. He recalled that the previous week Donnie had strayed into the bathroom while he was in the glass shower. The boy hadn't left anything out of his sketch; in fact, he rather exaggerated some features. Another sketch was evidently inspired by a glimpse Donnie had caught of his mother in one of her filmier nightgowns.

Roy went into the public phone booth outside the school office and called Elliott. "What are they so excited about?" the psychologist said. "The boy is only showing the normal sexual curiosity of a five-year-old."

"But they think he's three and a half," Roy whispered. "And he's actually one and a half."

"Makes no difference. He's psychologically at the five-year level. Getting closer to six. You have to expect such behavior."

"But what should I do? They want to kick him out of the school."

"Well . . . ," Elliott grumbled. "Tell them to take his crayons away. He doesn't have to draw. Let them keep him busy with basketwork or weaving—something like that."

Miss Lawson was finally appeased. Very well, she said, Donnie could stay if he behaved. But she did want to say that Mrs. Crowley certainly showed poor judgment in the subjects she taught her child to delineate.

Donnie's interest in drawing disappeared readily. His new fascination was books. He was the most attentive child at the story hour, she grudgingly reported. He always maneuvered himself to the seat beside her, and was already picking out some of the words as she read them.

But the peace lasted only three more weeks. This time when Miss Lawson phoned, she was adamant. Donnie Crowley couldn't stay in the Hopewell Nursery

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School another minute. Roy cursed and abandoned his typewriter again and took a fast drive to the school. Miss Lawson flatly refused to say what Donnie had done this time. It was unspeakable. Roy hunted up the registrar, who had already investigated the incident. What, it seemed, Donnie had done was to raise his hand during the reading of a fairy tale and inquire how the queen could have a baby if the king had been away at the wars for five years.

"Every kid in the world is curious about sex," Roy complained. "They all ask such questions."

"Not at the age of three," the registrar said. "It shows a morbid preoccupation with sex. It's very disruptive to our other children. I'm afraid we can't have this sort of thing around here."

Roy dispiritedly put Donnie in the car and drove home. Donnie kept looking at him worriedly, his blue eyes crinkled, his little button nose turned up at his father. "What did I do, Daddy?" he said plaintively.

"You little brat," Roy said.

Phyllis was waiting for them. Roy had to take Donnie to his room and close the door before he could tell her what had happened. "Can't even talk in front of the kid," he said bitterly.

"We'll have to find another nursery school, that's all," Phyllis said.

"What's the use? He'd only do something else to get himself expelled."

He jerked up the phone and dialed Elliott's number. As soon as the psychologist answered, Roy poured a tirade into his ear.

"Take it easy," Elliott said. "He's gotten too advanced for nursery school anyway. I'm ready to take over now."

"You? What do you mean?"

"I've got a class of six- to eight-year-olds who come here for reading and speech problems. Donald ought to be just about their level. He can spend at least four hours a day here. And it's all on the house, of course; I want the chance to really watch him from now on."

Phyllis didn't like it. "I'm not sure Doc Elliott is the best kind of influence, or example, for a child."

"Darn right he isn't," Roy said. "But what're we going to do? What can we do with the kid all day? We've got to send him somewhere."

Within two months after Donnie started in Elliott's private class, he was reading, with only slight assistance, such books as *The Poky Little Puppy, The Leaky Whale* and *Ted and Nina Go to the Grocery Store.* A few weeks after that, he was up to *The Story of Ferdinand, Winnie the Pooh* and *A Child's Garden of Verses.* He was even mak-

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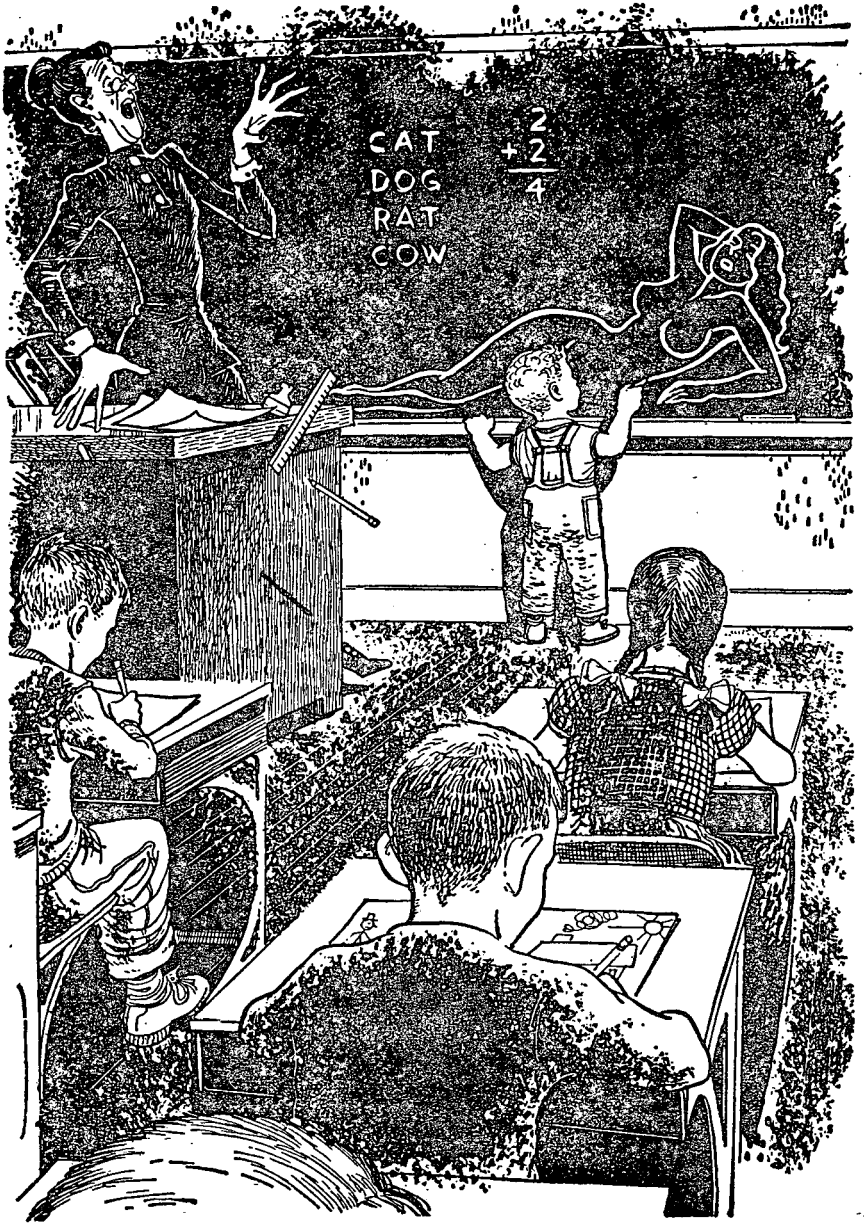

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ing up rudimentary poems of his own.

"Fantastic," Roy said. "Phyllis, we've got a literary genius on our hands."

"Heaven preserve us from any such," said Phyllis. "I'd drown the poor little tyke before I'd let him become a writer."

"I wonder," Roy mused. "I wonder if Doc Elliott can teach him how to type. . . ."

Now Donnie was deep in books; he was a bookworm, a bibliophile, a bibliomaniac. He was reading, or trying to read, everything in the Crowley library. Now the days became a constant barrage of questions. "What does *peripheral* mean, Daddy?" "What does it mean when it says, 'Art during this period was hampered by a severe academicism'?" Roy didn't mind this too much; he got a kick out of seeing Donnie's growing command of language, and he soon took the pressure off himself by teaching the boy how to use the unabridged dictionary.

But Donnie's wide reading began to become annoying when he got onto the innocent-question gag. It would go like this: "Daddy, how many bones does a person have?" "Thousand or so," Roy would say carelessly. "Two hundred and six!" Donnie would cry in triumph and derision.

That sort of thing got under Roy's skin after a while. He found himself rereading books he hadn't looked at in years. Science books particularly. Donnie was rapidly stuffing himself with facts covering the whole range of natural history. Roy experienced a definite feeling of tension every time Donnie asked a question; he never knew whether it was a sincere request for information or just a trap.

One evening, while Roy and Phyllis were watching television —Donnie was in his room, too busy reading to spend his time this way—the idea suddenly hit Roy. He pointed excitedly at the screen. "That—that's what I'm going to do!"

"What?" said Phyllis. There was a Milton Berle show on. At the moment, Milton happened to be getting amorous with a girl in tights. "What?" said Phyllis more sharply.

"Not this program," Roy said impatiently. "Thursday night. Junior Quizmasters. Why didn't I think of it before? He'll be terrific!"

Phyllis stared at him. "What do you want to do that for?"

"Use up some of that energy. Keep him busy. Give some motive, some direction to his reading. And make a few bucks in the process."

"Does a two-year-old child have to earn his own living?" Phyllis said acidly.

"He's not two. He's at least

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seven. Maybe nine or ten. Ask Doc Elliott."

The program director fell in love with Donnie at first sight. So did the producer and the sponsor's representative. That rounded innocent face, the pale blue eyes, the golden blond hair . . . . Every kid in the panel was dark brunet—visual monotony. The executives had been hunting for a blond prodigy for months. When Donnie handled a dozen of their practice questions with only two slight errors, they whipped a contract out. Seventy-five dollars a week, with a raise to a hundred if he weathered the four-week trial period successfully.

"Can I borrow your pen?" said Roy.

They didn't wait four weeks; they raised Donnie to a hundred after the second program. The mail response had been terrific. TV Digest scheduled Donnie for a cover picture, and John Crosby did a whole column on this brilliant five-year-old (the age Roy had settled on) who had none of the obnoxious cuteness and affectations of most juvenile performers.

Roy, who had been running into a dry spell in his writing and was beginning to worry about finances, now found he could relax a little. Phyllis, however, was worried. "It's unnatural, all this fuss and glamor, for a two-year-old child," she said. "It'll make it even harder for him to adjust to other children."

But, actually, the social part of Donnie's life improved. The neighbors, suddenly discovering they had a celebrity in their midst, quickly warmed to the Crowleys. They were willing now to overlook the Crowleys' previous attempt to pass off their grown child as an infant. It was just one of those eccentricities artists go in for, the neighbors decided indulgently. Wouldn't the Crowleys please drop in? And it certainly would be very sweet if little Donnie came to play with their children.

Roy promptly discontinued Donnie's attendance at Doc Elliott's clinic. Elliott protested that Donnie needed his personal attention, but Roy said firmly, "It's time he learned to play with normal kids." Donnie now became a member of the seven- to nine-year social set. He was shorter than his playmates, but not punier. He was sturdy-boned and firm-muscled, and he held his own in all their games.

Now got under way a new era of peace and security in the Crowley household. Donnie was well balanced, well adjusted, a source of nothing but parental pride. Roy, of course, wasn't doing much writing any more. He

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was too busy handling Donnie's interests. Donnie had his own show now—A Day with Donnie—in addition to the Quizmasters thing, and that meant Roy had to make two trips to New York each week with him. Then there were the other matters: Donnie's Oats, the new breakfast cereal; Donnie Denims, the two-piece outfits that were selling by the thousands in the department stores; Donnie's Quiz Book; the Donniehat, a modified mortarboard; Donnie's Own Chemistry Set; the Donniecycle, a bicycle with a horn that squeaked "I know"; and Donnie Tablets, Your Children's Favorite Way of Taking Vitamins. Roy had to handle the royalty arrangements on all of those.

In addition, there were fan mail, pin-up pictures, interviews, personal appearances. Merely handling the tax complications was a job in itself. Donnie was getting $26,000 a year on his TV shows, and the royalties came to about $30,000 more. Roy was claiming a high rate of depreciation on Donnie, since obviously he'd stop making dough as soon as he got out of the kid stage; but the local tax office wouldn't allow the claim, and Roy was fighting it out in the courts.

Only Phyllis seemed discontented with all this prosperity. "I thought you were a writer," she said.

"Good God, woman," Roy barked at her, "I never made more than seven thousand in my best years."

"I thought you loved your work."

"What are you talking about? This is something big. Do you realize next year we'll have Donnie up to at least a hundred thousand?"

Unfortunately, Donnie's social life began to give trouble again. By the time he was three, his seven- and eight-year-old neighbors utterly bored him. Roy had to scout around and find some nines and tens for him to play with. But Donnie used them up in a few months, and Roy had to go out hunting again. It got to be an annoying problem.

Roy finally hit on the idea of *hiring* friends for Donnie. He got them through a talent agency. He contracted for a team of four boys who came to visit Donnie according to a formal schedule of working hours. When Donnie squeezed them dry, in about three months, Roy got the agency to send over a new batch. Donnie surmised that the boys were being paid for their visits, but he didn't mind. "I understand I have to complete my social integration in one way or another," he said. "And this seems the best way."

Shortly after Donnie reached the age of five—he was playing

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with fourteen-year-olds then—calamity struck: Donnie broke a boy's arm. It was during a baseball game. Donnie was playing with this hired troupe plus some of the bigger boys of the neighborhood. One of the neighbor boys got ready to bat, and Donnie insisted it was his turn, and when the other boy refused to give in, Donnie twisted the bat loose and calmly fractured the boy's forearm.

The victim's parents sued for twenty-five thousand dollars. Roy quickly settled out of court for five. He was furious. Not so much at Donnie or the money-grubbing neighbors as he was angry at Doc Elliott.

"For God's sake," Roy stormed, "you were supposed to mature the kid's mind. Who said anything about developing his muscles? He's so goddam strong—he's like a little weight-lifter."

"You'd prefer him to be a weakling?" Elliott said harshly.

"Just normal!" Roy shouted. "That's all. Just normal."

"I'm sorry. I should've thought you'd be pleased, but there's no telling what goes on in that so-called brain of yours. You'll just have to bear with the situation. What's happened, of course, is that the prodding we gave the nerves caused them to branch out more—their axons sent extra fibers ramifying through the muscles. The constant stimulation of those extra fibers caused the muscles to develop faster. That's all. Sort of the reverse of what happens in polio, where deterioration of the nerves causes the muscles to shrivel."

"What good does this explanation do me?"

"Listen, you ungrateful chump, what do you want your boy to be—a pushover? Somebody was trying to take his place at bat. He wouldn't stand for it. What's wrong with that?"

"He didn't have to break the boy's arm, dammit."

"That's only an incident. The important thing is that Donnie has enough aggressiveness to see that his rights are recognized."

"Don't you think maybe it's too damn much aggressiveness?"

"Too much for now, perhaps. But remember—Donnie is a boy of the future. He must be ready for the world as it will be when he's older. Society is becoming more competitive year by year. You think things are hectic now; well wait till another generation has passed. It'll *really* be dog-eat-dog then. Donnie has to be prepared for that. If he doesn't have a highly developed competitiveness, he'll go under."

Roy was too angry to carry on the conversation. He stalked out of Elliott's office without a goodbye. That's the last time, he told himself; I'll never have anything to do with that jerk again.

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But within two weeks, Roy was ringing him up on the phone. "Why did I ever get connected with a crumb like you?" he howled.

"What's the trouble now?" Elliott said calmly.

"Everything! That damned competitiveness of yours—it's gotten out of hand. Donnie can't play with *anybody* now. Even the boys we're paying—they're all quitting. He's intolerable. He just knocked one down—knocked out two teeth. I'll have a lawyer's letter in the morning."

"What did he knock the boy down for?" Elliott asked curiously.

"Nothing. Some silly thing about the boy's making a scoring mistake in a tennis game."

"I see," Elliott said blandly. "Donnie's coming along splendidly."

"*What?*"

"Certainly. Nobody's going to get the better of *him*. He's a real boy of the future."

"What's this boy of the future stuff?" Roy yelled.

"Stop shouting in my ear and I'll tell you. In the future, all intelligent parents will pre-condition their children the way we did with Donald. It's the only way the child will be able to survive in the fierce competition that will prevail then. You know, I've made a study of the competitive tenor of society for the past hundred years. When you put the data on a graph, you see it getting steeper and steeper until now it's almost a vertically ascending line. I tell you, Crowley, every competitive aspect of our society will be intensified a thousandfold within the next two generations. Donnie is a boy for that age. I saw very carefully to that."

"You mean . . . you *deliberately* made him competitive?" Roy said hoarsely.

"Certainly. Of course, competitiveness isn't a simple trait that you can localize in one part of the brain. But we stimulated his motor area and also the hypothalamus, the emotional center, at the expense of the prefrontal area, which is the part of the brain involved with restraint, self-denial and similar traits. In that way, we achieved a stronger drive—a more untrammeled will, you might say. Which now manifests itself in competitiveness, among other things."

"You never told me anything about this before."

"For gosh sakes, man, I couldn't tell you everything. You wouldn't have understood it anyway. It's all part of a complicated plan—everything in the brain is interrelated. This whole thing was very carefully charted out before I ever went into it."

"If I'd ever known we were going to have all this trouble—"

"Do you know you disgust

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me?" Elliott snapped at him. "You make me sick. Whining to me like this. You didn't complain when you were spared the little unpleasantnesses other people go through when they have children. You were quite happy to get all the benefits I was able to give you, weren't you? In fact, you were pretty impatient with the least inconvenience—you insisted I put the child through another round in the Maturator, didn't you? Furthermore, you seem to be quite content to exploit the child's abilities and squeeze every last dollar you can out of him. You haven't whined about that—"

"Skip it," Roy snarled, and slammed down the receiver.

Now alone, without playmates, Donnie began to become moody, irritable, snappish. Roy and Phyllis began to find it very hard to manage him. It struck Roy that the boy's competitive impulses, which had found their outlet in play with other boys, was now being vented on them. But knowing the explanation didn't make it pleasanter, or excusable in Roy's eyes. All the fancy terms in all the psychology books couldn't alter the fact that the boy was simply being bad. He was surly to his father. He talked back to his mother. He complained continuously. He was dissatisfied with everything. He wanted to run the whole house.

One day, he was sitting in a chair, twanging a piece of wire. Phyllis told him to stop—then went over and snatched the wire from his hands. Donnie jumped up and punched her, full in the chest. Roy was coming in the door just as it happened. He ran over and grabbed the boy and gave him a licking, an old-fashioned, non-scientific licking. It was a fierce struggle—the boy was very strong—but Roy got him over his knee and applied his hand with all the bitterness he'd been storing up.

He let up only when his arm tired. He ordered the boy to go to his room. Donnie did as he was told; but he walked away with a defiant swing in his shoulders. And just before he passed through the doorway, he turned and gave Roy a look. A look that shocked Roy to his depths. It wasn't a boy's hurt look, a look of understandable resentment or bitterness. It was a stone-hard, stone-cold malevolence; a look of cold, unfeeling separateness, of unrelatedness. . . .

From then on, the Crowleys had a stranger in the house. A stranger whom they had once trustfully taken in and who had proved to be an enemy. He would not sit at the table with them. He would not speak. He ignored everything they said. He refused

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to go to the television studio—the networks were told he was sick and they'd have to get a substitute. He spent days just sitting in the living room and staring at his parents. Phyllis was becoming frantic. "He'll drive me mad," she whimpered.

"That's what he's trying to do," Roy said. "Hold tight."

Donald's sixth birthday arrived. Suddenly, hysterically, Phyllis was afire with plans for a party. She wanted it rich, gay, the way most of the earlier ones had been. She was sure the magic of the lighted candles would revive all the closeness of their previous years. "I'm going to bake the cake myself," she said, tense and flushed. "Roy, you go out and buy decorations—all kinds—everything—"

"For that monster?" Roy said grimly.

"Roy—please!"

He went out. He drove to the variety store, gave the salesgirl a ten-dollar bill and told her to load a bag with birthday-party decorations—he'd be back and pick them up. Then he drove to Elliott's place.

He found Elliott in the classroom giving blackboard instruction to half a dozen children. Roy waved him into the office. As soon as they were inside, Roy closed the door and grabbed the psychologist by the lapels.

"Where's that plan?"

"What—what's the matter?" Elliott trembled.

"That plan—the chart that tells the kind of boy you were trying to make. Where is it?"

"You—you wouldn't understand—"

Roy dragged him across the room to the desk. "Get it out!" He twisted the lapels across Elliott's throat.

"I d-don't have it—" Elliott struggled to free himself.

"Get it out!" Roy twisted the lapels tighter. But suddenly he saw it. It was right there on top of the desk. Elliott had evidently been reviewing it. A brown folder, with a typewritten title: *Prospectus: The Child of the Future.*

Roy flung the little psychologist aside, sent him tumbling halfway across the floor. He ripped the folder open. A thick sheaf of typewritten pages, more than a hundred of them. He riffled through them. Charts of the brain. Nerve pathways. A diagram of the Maturator. A long discussion of trends of social competition. The requirements for successful living in the years ahead. Roy kept turning impatiently. Abruptly he stopped. Here it was. A list, month by month, of anticipated levels of behavior. The words the child was expected to use at each stage. Toilet behavior. Feeding behavior. Sex interests. Atti-

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tudes toward playmates, parents. Roy read quickly. He came to the Sixth Year. His flesh became cold and crawling as he read:

In the child of the future, the thoroughly Maturated Child, the sixth year should mark a high development of his competitive drive; so high, that it will now turn naturally against his parents and quickly destroy them, as impediments to his further development. His expanded physical powers should make this easily feasible. . . .

Roy hurled the papers away and started grimly toward Elliott.

"It's—it's only theoretical—the future—" Eliott stammered.

"I'll—" The psychologist fled through the doorway.

Roy stopped, rushed back to the desk phone and dialed his own number. His heart pounded. "Phyllis! Are you all right?"

"Of course," she said. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Look, I'm coming right home. I'm bringing what you wanted. What are you doing now? Where's the boy?"

"He's in his room. I'm making the cake. What *is* the matter?"

"Nothing—just a— What color icing are you making?"

"White and pink. Why?"

"Make it green," he gritted.

"Green? Why on earth—?"

"Well, if you're so insistent . . . ."

Elliott was nowhere in sight when Roy strode through the classroom.

He went out and got into his car and sped to the variety store. His package was ready. He carried it to the garden counter. "Give me a can of Paris green," he said.

The clerk took the skull-marked can off the shelf. "Anything else, sir?"

"That'll be all I need," Roy said.

He drove home quickly. Phyllis needn't know anything about it—ever. He'd figure out some excuse to get her and the boy out of the room while he cut the cake and fixed up the boy's slice. It struck Roy that he had already, unwittingly, paved the way for this outcome by telling the television people the boy was sick. When he died, there would be no inquest, no investigation—not if Doc Elliott filled out the death certificate as a natural death. And he'd have to. Roy had a story that could ruin him if he balked. There couldn't be any hitch. Roy felt a huge sense of release and freedom as he walked up the front steps. He unlocked the door.

And heard, faintly, his wife's last despairing cry.

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Part Two of Three

If the sign of a first-rate writer is his ability to make his story increase in suspense and excitement as it moves along, then Keith Laumer (author of Worlds of the Imperium, A Trace of Memory, *and most recently* Galactic Diplomat) *is a first-rate writer. As a case in point, take this latest installment of his newest novel, in which young Lawrence O'Leary (formerly of quiet little Colby Corners) gets further embroiled in the kind of royal intrigue that makes the dream world of Artesia a bewildering and dangerous place to try out his Psychic Powers. Still, there are certain compensations—the beautiful Princess Adoranne, for one, and O'Leary's delightful ability to "manipulate" his environment, for another. But he is beginning to learn that he can't control everything in Artesia—for example, the deadly point of Count Alain's furious sword, which is about to demonstrate that it can draw real blood—O'Leary's!*

AXE AND DRAGON

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by Morrow

Synopsis of Part One

It was a long way—or maybe it was a short one—from young Lawrence O'Leary's drab little bedroom in Mrs. MacGlint's Clean Rooms and Board (Colby Corners, U.S.A.) to the anachronistic dream world of Artesia—where the police rode around in wooden steam cars and fabulous dragons lurked in the mysterious desert to the west—but when the penniless draftsman tried Professor Schimmerkopf's method for releasing the Psychic Energies, he got there in practically no time at all.

Marvelling at the unsuspected powers of his subconscious, O'Leary decided to explore the dark little street where he first arrived. Suitably attired—all he had to do was think about a change of clothes and "pop," he was wearing them—he walked into the Axe and Dragon Tavern across the way. Before he could quite grasp what was happening (especially when he managed to

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pour a hundred drinks out of a single wine bottle that refused to run dry), he succeeded in convincing everyone that he was a sorcerer. So they all fled in terror. Except one: the Red Bull, a burly cutpurse and smuggler, who nervously stood his ground, insisted on calling O'Leary the Phantom Highwayman, and suggested they team up together. When O'Leary refused, the bruiser turned ugly about it; so O'Leary thought hard and playfully changed the Red Bull's voice from tough bass to falsetto.

Just at that point, the police—looking like musketeers—arrived to arrest O'Leary on a charge of practicing sorcery. As they led him out to a waiting steam-car, however, O'Leary almost managed to escape—by trying to will himself back to Colby Corners—but somehow, woozy from wine probably, he couldn't quite make it.

Instead of being taken to the local police station, O'Leary was surprised to find himself brought to the Palace, where King Goruble—impressed by the young man's ability to conjure up a bottle of vintage wine—decided to investigate the case a little further. But when the King noticed a ring O'Leary was wearing—it bore an axe and dragon device—he suddenly turned pale, and insisted on an immediate private conference with the stranger.

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Alone in the King's private chambers, O'Leary was puzzled by what followed. First, the King questioned him further about the ring, but all O'Leary knew about it was that he had been wearing it for a very long time. The King then suggested that he wear it with the device turned inward—because of a local legend about the axe and dragon symbol, one that might cause him embarrassment during his stay in Artesia. (O'Leary took the suggestion.) Then the King turned to a more cryptic line of questioning. Apparently he believed that O'Leary had some secret information for him, but when O'Leary—still fatigued and now frankly bewildered—professed ignorance of what Goruble was driving at, the King suddenly lost his temper and ordered an immediate trial. The charge—sorcery.

During the trial (for reasons O'Leary couldn't fathom) Nicodaeus, the court magician, tried to soften the King's anger, but (for reasons O'Leary also couldn't fathom) Goruble seemed determined to see that O'Leary would be executed for sorcery. Just when it seemed too late, Yockabump the dwarf (the King's jester) popped up from under the throne-chair, goggled at O'Leary's ring, and chided everyone for not recognizing the hero that legend had it would one day arrive to deliver Artesia from the menace of the great dragon that guarded Lod the Giant's stronghold in the West. Urged by Nicodaeus, O'Leary played along and lightheartedly agreed to slay the dragon. (He was still confident that no harm could come to him in a dream.) Obviously dubious, the King finally gave in and reluctantly ordered the customary celebration for legendary heroes.

Shown to an elegant private room, O'Leary prepared to get ready for the fete that night. But when he attempted to conjure up some modern showering facilities, he got Daphne (the upstairs chambermaid) instead, bathtub and all. Embarrassed, he quickly thought up an expensive gown for her, invited her to the party, and shooed her out of the room just before Nicodaeus arrived to question him in so curious a way that O'Leary began to suspect that the court magician—with his cigarettes and camera disguised as a Ronson lighter—was much more than he seemed.

Then it was time to go down to the party, and O'Leary forgot all his questions and doubts—because it was then that he first saw the beautiful princess Adoranne. In fact, he began paying so much attention to her that, despite the difference in their rank, Adoranne soon began to show more interest in O'Leary than in her escort, Count Alain,

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who became so incensed by O'Leary's cavalier manner that he angrily suggested a "fencing match" to show who was the better man. Everyone in the room—except O'Leary—could see that the Count clearly meant a duel—*and to the death. But O'Leary readily accepted, sure that nothing would happen. After all, it was* his *dream—and Alain didn't really exist at all.*

With surprising speed the entire party quickly repaired to the moonlit courtyard, where the Count proceeded to whiz his sword through a dazzling warm-up display that could not be ignored. By contrast, when O'Leary drew his sword out, it felt as clumsy as a crowbar.

That's when he tried to back down without losing too much face, but all his efforts fizzled. In desperation, he tried to think himself back to the safety of Colby Corners—but again, unaccountably, he failed!

And this time—no dream, but all too real—Alain waited, the moonlight glinting on the naked steel in his hand.

CHAPTER VI

NICODAEUS was looking at him concernedly. ". . . instructions," he was saying. "Well, do the best you can, my boy. . . ." He took out the white handkerchief, flapped it.

"It's the distractions," O'Leary mumbled to himself. "I can't concentrate, with all these people watching—"

"Gentlemen, on guard!" Nicodaeus said sharply. Count Alain raised his sword, held it at the engage. Dumbly, Lafayette stepped forward, lifted his heavy blade, clanged it against the other. It was like hitting a wrought-iron fence.

"Say, just a minute!" O'Leary lowered his blade and stepped back. Alain stared at him, his black eyes as cold as outer space. O'Leary turned to Nicodaeus. "Look here, if this is a real duel, and not just a friendly lesson—"

"Ha!" Alain interjected.

". . . then as the challenged party, I have the choice of weapons, right?" Nicodaeus pulled at his lower lip. "I suppose so—but the meeting had already begun—"

"Never too late to correct an error in form," O'Leary said firmly. "Now, you take these swords—primitive weapons, really. We ought to use something more up-to-date. Pistols, maybe."

"You demand pistols?" Nicodaeus looked surprised.

"Why not pistols?" At least—O'Leary was thinking of the princess' eyes on him—he wouldn't look as silly missing with a pistol as he would with Alain chasing him around the courtyard slashing at his heels. . . .

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"Pistols it is, then," Nicodaeus was saying. "I trust suitable weapons are available?"

"In my room," O'Leary said. "A nice pair of weapons."

"As Sir Lafayette desires," one of Alain's seconds was saying. "Subject to Count Alain's agreement, of course."

"I'm sure the count won't want to chicken out at this point," O'Leary said. "Of course pistols are pretty lethal. . . ." He broke off, suddenly aware of what he was saying. Pistols. . . ?

"On second thought, fellows —" he started.

"I've heard of them," Alain was nodding. "Like small muskets, held in the hand." He shot O'Leary a sharp look. "You spoke only of cold steel when you goaded me to this meeting, sirrah; now you raise the ante—"

"That's all right," O'Leary said hastily. "If you'd rather not —"

". . . but I accept the gage," Alain said flatly. "You're a more bloodthirsty rogue than I judged by the look of you; but I'll not cavil. Bring on these firearms!"

"Couldn't we just cut cards . . . ?" But Nicodaeus was already speaking to a mop-haired page, who darted away, looking eager.

Alain turned his back, walked off a few paces, spoke tight-lipped to his seconds, who shot black looks at O'Leary. He shrugged apologetically, got scowls in return.

Nicodaeus was chewing his lip. "I like this not, Lafayette," he said. "With a lucky shot, he could blow your head off, even if you nailed him at the same time."

Lafayette nodded absently, his eyes half shut. He was remembering the pistols, picturing them as they lay snug in their jeweled holsters; he envisioned their internal workings, visualized their parts. . . . His ability to manipulate the environment seemed to come in spells, but it was worth a try. Tricky business, at this range. . . . He felt a reassuring flicker, faint but unmistakable—or was it? Perhaps it had just been a gust of wind . . . .

The boy was back, breathing hard, holding out the black leather belt with its elegant brightwork and its burden of long-barrelled pistols.

"I'll take those." Nicodaeus lifted the guns from the page's hands, crossed to the waiting count, offered both pistol butts. Alain drew one from its holster, hefted it, passed it to his seconds, who turned it over, wagged their heads, muttered together and handed it back. O'Leary took his, noted distractedly that it was a clip-fed automatic with a filed front sight. It looked deadly enough. . . .

"What distance is customary,

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Lafayette?" Nicodaeus enquired in a whisper.

"Oh, about three paces ought to be enough."

"What?" Nicodaeus stared at him. "At that range, no one could miss!"

"The objective is to hit," O'Leary pointed out. "Let's get on with it." He licked his lips nervously, hardly hearing as Nicodaeus instructed both combatants to stand back-to-back, their weapons held at their sides, at the signal to take three paces, turn, and fire.

Alain stepped into position, stood stiffly, waiting. Lafayette backed up to him.

"All right, go!" Nicodaeus said firmly. O'Leary gulped, took a step—another—a third—then whirled, raised the gun—

Alain's weapon was already up, pointed straight at O'Leary's heart. He saw the count's finger tighten on the trigger at the same instant that he sighted on the white blob of the other's shirt front, squeezed—

A jet of purple ink squirted in a long arc, scored a dead center hit as a stream of red fluid from Alain's gun spattered his own shoulder.

"I got you first!" O'Leary called cheerily, snapping another shot that arched across to catch Alain on the ear. It was a good, high-pressure jet, O'Leary noted approvingly; it followed as the haughty count reeled back, playing over his face, down the already empurpled shirt, piddled out just as Alain, in retreat, collided with his own startled seconds and went down. The crowd, in silent shock until then, burst out with a roar of laughter, above which a distinct titter from the direction of Princess Adoranne was clearly audible.

"Well, I guess I win," O'Leary lowered the gun, smiling and taking the accolade of the crowd. Alain was scrambling to his feet, scrubbing at his face with both hands. He stared at his violet palms, then with a roar leaped at his second, wrested the sword from the startled man's grip, and charged.

"Lafayette!" Nicodaeus suddenly roared. O'Leary looked around in time to see his rapier flying toward him, hilt-first. He grabbed it, brought it up just as Alain's onslaught was on him.

"Hey!" O'Leary back-pedalled, frantically warding off the count's wild attack, all style forgotten in the moment's rage. Steel clanged on steel as the bigger man's fury drove O'Leary back, back; his feet stumbled on the uneven pavement; the heavy blows numbed his arm, threatened to knock his weapon from his grip. There was no question of counterattack—

A mighty chop sent Lafayette's blade spinning. He had a

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momentary glimpse of Alain's face, purple with ink and fury, as he brought back his blade, poised for the thrust—

There was a flash, a resounding clong! as something white shot down from above to strike the count's head, bound aside, smash against the wall. Alain dropped his sword, folded slowly, knees first, slammed out flat on his face. A fragment of the missile clattered to O'Leary's feet. He let out his breath in a hoarse gasp, stooped and brought up the shard. It bore a familiar pattern of angels and rosebuds: The chamber pot from his room. He looked up quickly, caught a glimpse of a saucy face, ringed with dark curls, just withdrawing from a darkened window.

"Daphne," he muttered, "nice timing, girl. . . ."

Back in the ballroom there was a great deal of hearty laughter and congratulatory slapping of Lafayette's back.

"As pretty a piece of foolery as I've seen this twelvemonth," a grizzled old fellow in pale yellow knee-pants and a monocle chortled. "Young Alain's had it coming to him, what? Bit of a prig—but a trifle too stout a lad to bait!"

"You handled the situation nicely, my boy," Nicodaeus nodded sagely. "A fatality would have been in rather bad taste, and of course, you've made your point now, status-wise."

Adoranne came up, looking prettier than ever with her cheeks pink from the cold air, put a hand on Lafayette's arm.

"I thank you, noble sir, for sparing the count's life. He's learned a lesson he'll not soon forget—"

A sudden loud shriek rang out across the crowded ballroom floor, followed by the piercing accents of an angry female voice. At this new diversion, Lafayette's circle of admirers broke up, moved off craning to make out the source of the outbursts.

"Whew!" O'Leary looked around for a waiter, lifted the ninth—or was it tenth?—brandy of the evening from a passing tray. "Adoranne," he started, "now's our chance to get away from the mob for a minute. I noticed there's a nice garden outside—"

"Oh, Lafayette, let's discover what it is that's set the Duchess to clamoring like a fishwife spoiled of a copper!" She tugged at his hand playfully. He followed as Nicodaeus moved ahead, calling for way for her Highness.

"It's a chambermaid," someone was passing the word. "The saucy minx was mingling with her betters, wearing a stolen gown, mind you. . . !"

O'Leary had a sudden sinking feeling. He'd forgotten all about

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his invitation to Daphne. He emerged through the press into a cleared circle where the petite chambermaid, transformed in rose-colored silk set off by white gloves, silver slippers, and a string of luminous white pearls, defiantly faced a bony matron buckled into stiff yellowish-white brocade like a suit of armor. The latter shook a finger heavenward, her neck tendons vibrating like cello strings, the coronet atop her mummified coiffure bouncing with the vigor of the verbal assault.

". . . my girl, and I'll see to it that after the flogging, you're sent away to a workhouse where —"

"Ah, pardon me, Duchess," O'Leary stepped forward, winked encouragingly at Daphne, faced the incensed noblewoman. "I think there's been a slight misunderstanding here. This young lady—"

"Lady! I'll have you know this is a common servant girl! The audacity of the baggage appearing here—and in *my* gown! My seamstress completed it only today—"

"You must be mistaken," O'Leary said firmly. "The dress was a gift from me—and I invited her here—"

Behind him there was a sharp gasp. He turned. Adoranne looked at him, wide-eyed, then managed a forced smile.

"Another of our good Sir Lafayette's jests," she said. "Be calm, Veronica dear; the girl will be dealt with—"

"No, you don't understand," O'Leary protested. "There's been a mistake. I gave her the dress this evening—"

"Please, noble sir," Daphne broke in. "I . . . I'm grateful for your chivalrous attempt to aid a poor servant girl, but it's no use. I . . . I stole the dress, just as her ladyship said."

"She did not!" Lafayette waved his arms. "Are you all out of your minds? I tell you—"

The Duchess pointed a skeletal finger at a decorative motif on the bodice of the gown. "Is that, or is that not, the crest of the House of High Jersey?" Her voice was shrill with triumph. "And if someone will have the garment off the trollop, I'll show you the maker's mark!"

"She's quite right, of course," Nicodaeus muttered at O'Leary's side. "What's all this about giving her the dress?"

"I . . . I. . . ." O'Leary stared from the Duchess to Daphne, who stood now with downcast eyes. A suspicion was beginning to dawn: Somehow, his ability to summon up artifacts at will wasn't quite as simple as he'd thought. When he had called for a bathroom, he'd gotten a tub—complete with occupant—transferred, the girl had said, from

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her garret room under the palace roof. And when he had ordained a dress in the closet, he hadn't created it from nothing; he had merely shifted the nearest available substitute to hand—in this case, from the wardrobe of the Duchess.

"I'll pay for the dress," he blurted. "It's not her fault. She didn't know it was stolen—that is, I didn't steal it—not really. You see, I invited her to the party, and she said. . . ."

He trailed off. Interested smiles were fading. Adoranne tossed her head, turned and moved grandly away. The Duchess was glaring at him like a mother tyrannosaurus surprising an early mammal sucking eggs.

"Adoranne, wait a minute! I can explain—" He caught Daphne's tear-brimmed eye.

"Come along, Lafayette," Nicodaeus tugged at his sleeve. "The joke didn't go over; these people are pretty stuffy about protocol—"

"Daphne," O'Leary started. "I'm sorry—" The girl raised her head, looked past him. "I do not know you, sir," she said coldly, and turned away.

"Oh, dammit all!" O'Leary grimaced, let his arms fall at his sides. "I wish I'd never thought of the infernal dress in the first place—"

There was a startled yelp from the Duchess, a squeak from Daphne, a delighted roar from the males in the audience. Lafayette gaped, caught a fleeting glimpse of a curvaceous white flank as Daphne, clad only in silver slippers, a few bits of lace, and blushes vanished into the crowd, followed by a rising storm of applause.

"Oh, capital, old fellow!" a stout gentleman in deep red velvet slammed O'Leary's shoulder with a meaty hand. "Done with mirrors, I suppose?"

"Ah, Sir Lafayette, you are a sly fox!" another appreciative oldster boomed. The Duchess sniffed, glared, stalked away.

"Where's Adoranne gone?" Lafayette rose on his toes, staring across heads.

"This wasn't exactly the kind of prank to impress Her Highness with," Nicodaeus said. "You won't see her again this evening, my boy."

Lafayette let out a long sigh. "I guess you're right. Oh, well; the party's breaking up, anyway. Maybe in the morning I can explain."

"Don't even try," the magician advised.

Lafayette eyed him glumly. "I need some time to figure out a few things before I try any more good deeds," he said. "Maybe if I sleep on it—but on the other hand, if I go to sleep—"

"Never mind, my boy. She

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won't stay angry forever. Go along and get some rest now. There are a few things I want to discuss with you in the morning."

Back in his room, Lafayette waited while a soft-footed servant lit a candle; in the dim light he pulled off his clothes, used the wash-basin to slosh water over his head, towelled off. He blew out the taper, then went to the four-poster, pulled back the blankets, clambered in with a grateful sigh—

Something warm and smooth cuddled up against him. With a muffled yelp he bounded from the bed, whirled to stare—in faint moonlight from the window—at the bright-eyed face and bare shoulder of Daphne, looking up, tousel-headed, from under the covers.

"Count Alain gave you an awful drubbing, didn't he, sir? Come along and I'll rub your back."

"Uh, thanks for dropping that, uh, *missile* on him," O'Leary started. "But—"

"Never mind that," Daphne said. "It was nothing. But your poor bruises. . . ."

"Lucky for me he used the edge." Lafayette moved his arm gingerly. "It is pretty sore, at that—but what in the world are you doing here?"

She gave him an impish smile. "Where else could I go, milord, in my condition?"

"Well. . . ." O'Leary froze, listening for a sound. It had been a stealthy sort of creak.

"Hssst!" the voice came from across the dark room. O'Leary tensed, remembering his sword, across the room on the floor in a heap with his clothes.

"Sir Lafayette, come quickly," the voice hissed. "It concerns the welfare of Her Highness. Make no outcry! Secrecy is vital!"

"Who are you?" O'Leary demanded. "How did you get in here?"

"No time to talk! Hurry!" The voice was a throaty rasp, unfamiliar. Lafayette squinted, trying to get a glimpse of the intruder. "What's happened?"

"No more talk! Follow me or not, as you choose! There's not a moment to lose."

"All right; wait until I get my pants on. . . ." He fumbled his way across to his clothes, pulled on breeches and a shirt, jammed his feet into shoes, and caught up a short cloak.

"All right, I'm ready."

"This way!"

Lafayette made his way across toward the sound of the voice. As he passed the bed, Daphne's hand reached out, tugged him down.

"Lafayette," she breathed in his ear. "You must not go! Perhaps it is a trick!"

"I've got to," he whispered

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back, equally quietly. "It's—"

"Who's that?" the voice snapped sharply. "To whom do you speak?"

"Nobody," Lafayette pulled free, went toward the voice. "I always mutter to myself when I don't know what's going on. Look here, is she all right?"

"You'll see."

A line of faint light showed against the wall, widened as a four-foot rectangle of paneling slid aside. A cloaked silhouette showed against it for a moment, slipped past. O'Leary followed, barely able in the deep gloom to make out a narrow low-ceilinged passage, the stealthy figure of his guide. He cracked his head on a low beam, swore, scraped aside cobwebs that clung to his face. There was an odor of dust and stale air and mice; somewhere wind whined in a cranny in the wall.

The passage led more or less straight, with an occasional jog around a massive masonry column, then turned right, continued another fifty feet, dead-ended at a coarsely mortared brick wall.

"We go up here," the hoarse voice said shortly. Lafayette groped, found rough wooden slats nailed to a vertical post against the wall. He went up, stepped off into a new passage, hurried after his guide. He tried to estimate his position in the palace. He was on the third floor, about halfway along the east wing—

Just ahead, there was a soft creak, a faint rusty squeal. A hand caught his arm, thrust a coarse-textured sack into his hand—a sack heavy with something that clinked.

"Hey, what's—" A hearty shove thrust Lafayette violently forward. He stumbled, struck something with his shoulder, felt a rug underfoot now, caught a scent of a delicate perfume. He whirled, heard a panel slam in his face; his hands scraped fruitlessly across a solid-seeming wall. There was a stir behind him in the room, a sharp cry, quickly cut off. O'Leary flattened himself, trying desperately to see through the darkness. Someone called in the next room. There were hurried footsteps; a door opened across the room, fanning soft light across a wedge of rich-patterned rug, a slice of brocaded wall, an arch of gilded ceiling. O'Leary saw a window with dainty ruffles, a vast canopied four-poster. A short, fat woman in a flounced nightcap puffed through the open door, holding high a candle.

"Your Highness! You cried out!"

Lafayette stood frozen, staring at a vision of bare-shouldered femininity sitting up in the huge bed, staring across at him

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with an expression of astonishment. The fat woman followed Adoranne's gaze, saw Lafayette, screeched, clapped a hand to her broad bosom, screeched again, louder.

"Shhh! It's only me!" Lafayette started forward, shushing the woman frantically; she yelled again, backed against the bed.

"Stay back, villain! Touch not one hair of Her Highness's head —!"

"It's all a mistake." O'Leary indicated the wall through which he had entered. "Somebody came into my room and told me—"

There was a pounding of feet, a clash of steel. Two immense guardsmen in flaring helmets, polished breastplates and greaves thundered into the room, took one eye-popping look at Adoranne, who quickly pulled the pink silk sheet up to her chin.

"There!" the fat lady-in-waiting screamed, pointing with a plump finger. "A murderer! A ravisher! A thief in the night!"

"Let me explain how I happened to be here, fellows—" Lafayette broke off as the two men rushed him, pinned him against the wall with six-foot-long double-headed pikes at his chest. "It was all a mistake! I was in my room, asleep, and all of a sudden —"

"—you took it into your head to violate the boudoir of Her Highness!" the fat woman finished for him. "Look at the great wretch, half-dressed, burning with unholy lust—"

"I was only—"

"Silence, dog," one of the pikemen grated between set teeth. "Who thinks to harm our princess begs for bloody vengeance!"

"Did he—did he. . . ?" The other guard was glaring at O'Leary with eyes like hot coals.

"The monster had no time to achieve his evil purpose," the chubby woman bleated. "I placed my own body between him and that of Her Higness, offering it gladly if need be to save Her Highness from this fiend!"

"Has he taken anything?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," O'Leary protested. "I'm no thief!" He waved his arms. "I—" The bag, still clutched in his hand, slammed the wall. He stared at it dumbly.

"What's he got there?" One of the men seized the sack, opened it, peered inside. Over his shoulder, Lafayette caught a glimpse of Adoranne, an expression of mischievous interest on her perfect features.

"Your Highness!" The man stepped to the bed, upended the contents of the pouch on the rose-bud adorned coverlet—a sparkling array of rings, necklaces, bracelets, glinting red, green, diamond-white in the candle light.

The fat woman gasped. "Your

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Highness's jewels!" Lafayette made a move, felt the pike dig into his chest hard enough to draw blood. "Somebody shoved that into my hands," he called. "I was in the dark, in the passage, and—"

"Enough, thief!" the pike wielder snarled. "Move along now, you! I need little excuse to split your gizzard!"

"Look, Adoranne, I was trying to help! He told me—"

"Who? Have you an accomplice in your felony?" The guard jabbed again to emphasize the question.

"No! I mean there was a man—a medium-sized man in a cloak; he came into my room—"

"How came the rogue here?" the fat woman shrilled. "Did you great louts sleep at your posts of duty?"

"I came in through some kind of sliding panel." O'Leary turned to the princess. "It's right over there. It closed up behind me, and—"

Adoranne's chin went up; she gave him a look of haughty contempt, turned away.

"I thank you, Martha," she said coolly to the fat lady-in-waiting. "And you, gentlemen—for your vigilance in my defense. Leave me now."

"But, Your Highness—" the fat woman started.

"Leave me!"

"Adoranne, if you'd just—" A painful prod in the solar plexus doubled O'Leary over. The pikemen caught his arms, hauled him from the room. "Wait!" he managed. "Listen. . . !"

"Tomorrow you can tell it to the headsman," the guard growled. "Another word outa you and by the three tails o'Goop I'll spare the crown the expense of an execution!"

In the corridor, Lafayette, still gasping, fixed his eye on the intersection ahead. *Just around the corner,* he improvised. *There's a . . . a policeman. He'll arrest these two—*

The pikemen shoved him roughly past the turn; the corridor was empty of cops. Too bad. Must be a spot he'd already seen and thus couldn't change. *But that door just ahead: It would open, and a python would come slithering out, and in the confusion—*

"Keep moving, you!" The pikeman pushed him roughly past the door, which failed to disgorge a snake.

A gun, then—in his hip pocket—

He reached, found nothing. He should have known that one wouldn't work; he had just put the trousers on a few minutes earlier, and there had been no armaments bagging the pockets then—besides which, how could he concentrate with these two plug-uglies hauling at him? A

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sharp jerk at his arm directed him down another side way. He stumbled on, assisted by frequent jabs and blows, down stairs, and more stairs, into a dim malodorous passage between damp stone walls, past an iron gate into a low chamber lit by smoking flambeaux in black iron brackets. He leaned against a wall, trying to decide which of his bruises hurt worst, while his pike-wielding acquaintance explained his case in a few terse words to an untrimmed lout with thick lips, pale stubble and pimples.

"One o' them guys, huh?" The turnkey nodded knowingly. "I know how to handle them kind."

"Wait . . . till I get my breath," O'Leary said. "I'll . . . visit you . . . with a plague of boils. . . ."

A blow slammed him toward a barred gate. Hard hands hustled him through, along to a mouldy oak-plank door. Keys jangled. The blond jailer cuffed him aside, hauled the door open with a rasp of dry hinges. O'Leary caught a glimpse of a stone floor, a litter of rubbish—

Damn! If he'd just thought to picture something a trifle cosier, before he saw it—

"Kind of crummy quarters fer a dude like youse, Buster," the turnkey leered. "You got straw, but I'll give youse a clue: Use the bare floor instead. We got a few fleas and stuff, you know?" Then a foot in the seat sent O'Leary spinning inside and the door thudded behind him.

CHAPTER VII

O'Leary sat on the floor, blinking into total blackness. Some day he'd have to read up on Freudian dream-symbolism. All this business of stumbling around in the dark being beaten by large men must be some sort of punishment-wish, probably arising from guilt feelings due to the Adoranne and Daphne sequences—particularly the former. Daphne had been just a jolly diversion, but the princess, sitting up in bed in that invisible nightie—

These were no thoughts to be having under the present circumstances. O'Leary got to his feet, felt his way to a wall, made a circuit of the cell. There were no windows, unless they were above his reach; and just the one door, massive and unyielding. He heard a furtive scuttling. Rats, no doubt. Not a very nice place to spend the rest of his dream. He sighed, regretting again that he had been too rattled to provide a few amenities before it was too late. But perhaps he could still manage something. . . .

Light, first. A candle would do. He pictured a two-inch stub lying among the litter in the far

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corner. He hadn't seen much of the room; there could easily be a candle there, and a match in his pocket. . . .

There was a thump, as though the universe had gone over a tar-strip in the road. O'Leary went across, groped among odds and ends, felt straw, small bones—and a greasy lump of wax with a stub of wick. Aha! Now for a match. In his pocket, a small item like that could have passed unnoticed. He checked, felt the smooth cover of a match folder, pulled it out and lit up. The candle burned with a feeble yellow flame, its light confirming his first impression of the cramped cell. Well, that part couldn't be helped—but it would be wise to think carefully about his next move. O'Leary settled himself on the dryest spot on the floor. It looked as though he were stuck here—unless he could manage to regain the sanctuary of his room back at Mrs. MacGlint's house. The last two tries hadn't worked out, but then that was to be expected; after all, who could focus the Psychic Energies with someone hauling him toward a paddy-wagon, or threatening to stick a foot of razor-edged steel into his internal arrangements? At least it was peaceful here in the cell. But going back was a last resort; he couldn't just vanish without even a chance to explain to Adoranne how he had happened to be in her bedroom with a sackful of loot.

But what could he do? If things hadn't happened so fast, he could have dreamed up some way out—some last-minute rescue; and maybe it still wasn't too late: Nicodaeus, maybe; he could get him out of here. Probably he hadn't heard about his protege's arrest yet—or, O'Leary amended, he had just heard a few minutes ago. By now he'd be coming along the hall, passing the iron-barred door, ordering guards around, demanding O'Leary's immediate release—

There was a sound from the door. A tiny panel opened; light glared in. O'Leary jumped up as he saw the face at the opening.

"Daphne! What are you doing here?"

"Oh, Sir Lafayette, I knew something terrible would happen!"

"You were right; there's dirty work afoot. Look, Daphne, I have to get out of here! I'm worried about Adoranne; whoever led me to her room—"

"I tried to tell them, sir—but they think I'm your confederate!"

"What? Nonsense! But don't worry, Daphne, Nicodaeus will be along soon—"

"He tried, sir—but the king was furious! He said it was an open-and-shut case, that you were caught red-handed—"

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"But it was a frame-up!"

"At least you won't have a long wait in that awful cell; it's only three hours till dawn; it comes early this time of year."

"They're letting me out at dawn?"

"For the execution," Daphne said sadly.

"Whose execution?"

"Y—yours, sir. . . ," Daphne sniffled. "I'm to get off with twenty years—"

"But—but they *can't!* King Goruble needs me to kill the dragon, and—and—"

"OK," a guard's rough voice interrupted. "You seen him, kid. Now how about that smooch—" The panel slammed with a bang. O'Leary groaned, resumed his seat. He'd not only reduced his own credit to zero, but dragged an innocent girl down with him. It looked like the end of the line—the second time in the last few hours that imminent death had stared him in the face. Some dream! What if he failed to wake up in time, and the sentence was actually carried out? He'd heard of people dreaming they were falling, and hitting, and dying in their sleep of heart failure. A hard story to check; but that was one experiment he couldn't afford to try. There was no help for it; he'd have to wake up.

Sitting against the wall, he relaxed, closed his eyes. *Mrs. MacGlint's house,* he thought, picturing the front porch in the grey pre-dawn light, *the dark hall, the creaky stairs, the warped, black-varnished door to his room with its chipped brown enamelled-steel knob; and the room itself, the odor of stale cookery and ancient woodwork and dust. . . .*

He opened an eye. The candle flame across the cell guttered, making shadows bob on the stone wall. Nothing had changed. O'Leary felt uneasiness rising like water in a leaky hold. It had to work, this time!

He tried again, picturing the cracked sidewalk in front of the boarding house, the dusty leaves of the trees that overhung it, the mailbox at the corner, the down-at-heels shops along the main street, the tarnished red brick of the Post Office. . . .

That was real, not the ridiculous dream about princesses and dragons. He was Lafayette O'Leary, aged twenty-six, with a steady if not inspiring job at which he was due in a very few hours. Old Man Biteworse would be hopping mad if he showed up late, bleary-eyed from lack of sleep. There was no time to waste, idling in a fantasy-world, while his real-life job waited, with its deadlines and eyestrain and competition for the next two-dollar raise—

O'Leary felt a faint jar. A breath of warmth touched his face. His eyes snapped open. He

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was staring into a bright mist that swirled and eddied. The air was hot, moist. Abruptly, he was aware of dampness soaking into the seat of his trousers. He scrambled up, saw vague pale shapes moving in the fog. Out of the steam, figures appeared—the pink bodies of young girls with wet hair, wearing damp towels, carelessly draped. Lafayette gaped. He had made his escape—not back to Mrs. MacGlint's it appeared, but to a sort of Arabian Paradise, complete with teen-age houris—

There were sudden startled yelps; the nearest houris fled, squealing. Others bobbed into view, saw O'Leary, hastily hitched up towels and dashed away, adding to the outcry.

"Oh, no," Lafayette muttered. "Not again. . . ." He moved off quickly to his left, encountered a corner, and the sound of running water. He tried the other direction, spotted the darker rectangle of a doorless arch, made for it—and collided with a vast bulk in bundlesome tweeds hurtling through from the room beyond. There was a bleat like the cry of an outraged cow hippo defending her young; a rolled umbrella whistled past O'Leary's ear. He ducked aside; the shadowy giantess charged again, emitting piercing shrieks against the background of lesser yelps. Lafayette backed, warding off a rain of blows from the flailing implement.

"Madam, you don't understand!" he shouted. "I just wandered in by mistake, and—" His foot slipped. He had a momentary impression of a square red face like a worn-out typist's cushion closing in, the mouth gaping, tiny eyes glaring. Then a bomb exploded and sent him hurtling into a bottomless darkness.

"The way I see it, Chief," a meaty voice was saying, "this character hides out over on the men's side last night, see? Then after the joint's locked up, he goes up a rope, out the skylight, across the roof, in the other skylight, down another rope, and hides out in the shower room until Mrs. Prudlock's Early Morning Modren Dance Class gets there—"

"Yeah?" a voice like soft mud came back. "So what'd he do with them ropes?"

"Maybe he flushes 'em down the john."

"Yeah? And maybe he ate 'em."

"Huh? How could a guy eat forty feet o' rope, chief?"

"The same way he done all that other stuff you said, lamebrain!"

"Huh?"

"Look, I think I got it, Chief," an eager voice announced. "He dresses up like a janitor, get it? And—"

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"Only one janitor at the Y. Ninety years old. Checks out clean. Turned in a complaint last year he seen a nood dame."

"Geeze."

"Yeah." There was a moment of awed silence. Then: "You boys sure you checked that side door?"

"She was locked up tighter'n a card-shark's money belt, Chief."

"Now, my theory is," another voice put in, "he come in dressed as a broad, like. And after he's inside—"

"—he puts on tight britches and a cape, and jumps out at old lady Prudlock. Yah!"

The discussion continued. O'Leary sat up, winced at a throb from the back of his head, others from various parts of his body representing blows from Alain's sword, jabs from the pikemen, and a few assorted kicks, cuffs and falls. He looked around; he was in a small room with walls of white-washed cement, a bare concrete floor, a no-nonsense toilet, minus a lid, a tiny washbowl with one water tap and a mirror above. There were two bunks bolted to the wall, on the lower of which he was sitting. Beyond a wide, steel-grilled door he could see a short stretch of two-tone brown-painted hallway, another barred door, and beyond it a group of men in baggy dark-blue suits with shiny seats, and fat leather holsters strapped to wide hips.

O'Leary got to his feet, made it to the small barred window. Outside, early morning sunshine gleamed down on the drowsy view of the courthouse lawn, the park with the Civil War cannon, and the second-best shopping street of Colby Corners. He stumbled back, sank down on the bunk. He was home—that much was clear—but how in the name of Goop had he gotten into the county jail? He had been in a dungeon under the palace—the present quarters were a marked improvement over their Artesian equivalent—and then. . . .

Oh, yes. The houris—and all that steam, and the big woman with the umbrella. . . .

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"Look, Chief," a rubbery voiced cop was saying. "What's the rap we're hanging on this joker?"

"Whatta ya mean, what's the rap? Peeping Tom, trespasser, breaking and entering, larceny —"

"We didn't find no busted locks, Chief. Illegal entry, maybe—but the Y is open to the public—"

"Not the *YW!* Not to the male public, it ain't!"

"What paragraph o' the Penal Code's that in, Chief?" Meaty-voice sounded genuinely interested.

"Well—I dunno exactly. But—"

"Did the guy swipe anything?"

"Naw—he just come fer the scenery." Guffaws rewarded this sally. The eager one cleared his throat. "What's the penalty for looking at nood dames, Chief?"

"Hey, Chief, can we hang a Peeping Tom on a guy if he's working in broad daylight?"

"Chief, maybe somebody left the door open, and this character wanders in off the street looking for the men's room, like. . . ."

O'Leary tuned out the legal hassel. There was something very strange here. From what the cops were saying, it was clear enough that he'd actually *been* in the YW; that part hadn't been a dream—and the knot on the back of his head, where the tile floor had come up and hit it, confirmed it. The old battleaxe had called in the police, hence his presence in a cell—but how—and why—had he gotten into the shower room in the first place? It was a good five blocks from Mrs. MacGlint's; about the same distance, he realized with dawning comprehension, as that from the Axe and Dragon to the Palace. Did that mean that he had actually covered the distances that he had dreamed of moving? Had he walked in his sleep? But he never wore pajamas, and—he looked down quickly, confirming that he was wearing pants—

Tight-fitting pants, of a deep blue, with tiny bows at the knee. And low-cut shoes, with thin soles and silver buckles.

He gulped, staring at himself. Excitement started up, like distant drums. There was something strange here, something more than a backfired experiment with self-hypnosis. Artesia was no dream; the clothes he had gotten there were real. And if the clothes were real—he tugged at the cloth, felt its reassuring toughness—then perhaps all of it . . . ?

But that would be too embarrassing! What would Adoranne be thinking now—and Daphne? But perhaps the chambermaid would get a chance to talk to the Princess, tell her what she'd seen . . . .

No good. She couldn't be ex-

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pected to announce that she'd been sharing O'Leary's bed when the mysterious messenger came —not that the story would improve his standing with Adoranne—and anyway the girl was under a cloud as a thief. Nobody would listen. More likely, they'd look her up without a hearing, and Adoranne would go on thinking . . . whatever she thought.

But the whole thing was too idiotic! O'Leary came to his feet, grunted as his wounds throbbed —those were real enough, too—and took a quick turn up and down the cell. You *couldn't* go to bed and dream, and then wake up and find it had all really happened. He stopped pacing, considering: Maybe he was at home, dreaming that he was in Artesia dreaming that he was in jail. If that were so—

Hell, if that were so, he was already hopelessly skitzy. He put a hand against the wall; it was rough, cold, solid. If it wasn't real cement, it might as well be.

O'Leary went back to the bunk and sat down. This was all going to be very hard to explain to Mr. Biteworse. When the story got out that he had been arrested in the girl's shower at the Y, wearing funny pants and a shirt with ruffles—

Well, it was goodbye job—and he'd never get another one—even if the police released him, which seemed unlikely in view of the charges being discussed in the outer office. He had to do something—but what? If he were back in Artesia, he could simply conjure up a key to the door, and be on his way. Things weren't quite that simple here in Colby Corners. Solid objects had a way of staying solid. If you wanted a telephone, say, you had to go find one previously installed by the Bell Company—you couldn't just whistle it up.—Or could you?

Lafayette sat up, holding a tight rein on a racing imagination. After all, he'd dreamed up all of Artesia; why not just one little old telephone? It could be out in the hall, maybe—mounted on the wall. And if he reached through the bars—quietly, so as not to interrupt the philosophers in the next room—

It was worth a try. O'Leary rose, eased over to the barred door, stole a look. The coast was clear. He closed his eyes, pictured a phone bolted to the brick wall, surrounded by scribbled numbers, with a tattered book dangling below. . . .

Cautiously, he reached—and found nothing. He drew a deep breath, gathered his resources. *It's there,* he hissed. *Just a little farther to the right.* . . .

His groping hand encountered something hard, cool. He grasped it, brought it into view. It was an old-fashioned instrument with a brass mouthpiece and a dangling

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ear unit. He lifted the latter from the fork, and paused. There probably wasn't a phone in Nicodaeus' lab, but that could be fixed. There would be a lot of locked cabinets with solid-wood doors; the phone would be fitted inside one of them—the one just to the left as you entered the lab. Sure, that would work.

"Central," a bright voice said tinnily in his ear. "Number, please."

"Ah, nine five three four . . . nine oh oh . . . two one one," Lafayette said, noticing how the number seemed to spell itself out. It was even worse than the usual seven digit monster.

"Thank you. Hold the line, please."

He held the receiver, listening to the hum, punctuated by an occasional crackle, then a loud pop. There was a harsh buzz. Pause. Buzz. Pause. What if Nicodaeus wasn't home? The cop would notice him any minute now, and—

There was a clunk! and the sound of heavy breathing.

"Hello?" a deep voice said cautiously.

"Nicodaeus!" Lafayette, tense, gripped the ear-piece.

"Lafayette! Is it you, my boy? I thought—I feared—"

"Yeah—let's skip that for now. I seem to have made a couple of small errors, and now—"

"Lafayette! Where did you get my number? I didn't think—that is, it's, uh, unlisted. And—"

"I have my methods—but I'll go into all that later. I need help! What I want to know is, ah, where—I mean, how—oh, dammit, I don't know what I need!"

"Dear me, this is all very confusing, Lafayette. Where did you say you are now?"

"I'd tell you, but I'm afraid you wouldn't understand! You see, you don't actually exist—that is, I just thought of you—but then, when Goruble slapped me in the cell, I decided to wake up—and here I was!"

"Lafayette—you've hurt your head, poor lad. Now, about my telephone number—"

"To heck with your telephone number! Get me out of here! I've got half a dozen stupid cops debating which of six assorted felonies I'm to be held without bail for—"

"Dumb cops, huh," an ominous voice growled. The phone was yanked from Lafayette's hand, and he stared into the bovine countenance of a thick-lipped redhead with old boxing scars on his cheekbones.

"You don't talk to no mouthpiece without the chief says okay, see?" The cop placed the phone out of sight. "An' that'll be a dime for the call."

"Put it on my bill," Lafayette said bitterly. The cop snorted and turned away.

With a groan, Lafayette

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stretched out on the hard bunk, closed his eyes. Maybe it was nutty—but his only chance seemed to be to try to get out of this idiotic situation the same way he'd gotten into it. All he had to do was slide back into some other dream; a nice, restful place this time, he decided; to hell with romantic old streets and cozy taverns and beautiful princesses . . . but Adoranne *had* been gorgeous—and that flimsy nightgown. . . . Damn shame he had to go off like that, leaving her thinking he was a liar, a cheat, a thief and a sneak-by-night. All he'd been doing was trying to rescue her. The man—the one who had come for him—had there been something familiar about the fellow? He was probably just a hireling—but who had sent him—and why? Alain, maybe? No, the count was a stuffed shirt, but not really the devious type; he'd simply have run him through. Who then? Nicodaeus? But what motive would he have?

O'Leary's ruminations were cut short by a sudden sensation of sliding—as though the cell had silently skidded a foot in some undefined direction. He sat up, staring across at the window. There were red checked curtains beside it, and a potted geranium on the sill—

Curtains? Gerania? O'Leary jumped to his feet, stared around the room. It was low ceilinged, crooked-floored, spotlessly clean, with a feather bed in a polished wooden frame, a three-legged stool, and a door made of wooden planks. Gone were the iron-grilled door, the concrete walls, the barred window, the cops. He went to the window, looked out at a steep street filled with the ring of a blacksmith's hammer, the shouts of stall-keepers hawking their wares. Half-timbered fronts loomed up across the way, and behind and beyond he saw the turrets of a tall castle-from the tops of which gay pennants fluttered. He was back in Artesia! O'Leary felt himself smiling foolishly out at the scene. He was equipped, it seemed, with a one-track subconscious. In spite of himself, he was glad to be here. And now that he was, he might as well take the time to clear up his misunderstanding with Adoranne, before going back. If he could just see her, explain, surely she'd understand. It might not be easy, getting past the guards around the palace, but he'd have to give it a try.

O'Leary washed up quickly at the basin on a stand in the corner, tucked in his shirt-tail, smoothed back his hair, dropped one of the small gold-pieces he had obtained from Nicodaeus in change for a fifty on the bed, and went down to the street. The

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hammering, he saw, was emanating from a shop with a sign announcing Flats Fixed While U Wait. A wooden steam-cart was jacked up with two wheels on the sidewalk while the smith pounded out a new steel-strap tire for a massive oak wheel. O'Leary turned down the first side street leading toward the palace, threading his way through a bustling throng of plump Artesian housewives doing their morning shopping at stalls heaped with apples, bananas, pears, boxes of ripe berries, bins of carrots and beans and turnips, strings of brown onions, baskets of eggs, plucked fowl dangling in rows by yellow feet. He sniffed, caught the aroma of fresh-baked bread. He hadn't realized how hungry he was. But then he hadn't eaten since—when?

The bake shop was just ahead. He turned in, went down two steps into a cozy room crowded by two tiny tables, ordered pastries and a cup of coffee from a red-cheeked girl in starched white. He finished, reached for his money, hesitated. The City Guard just might be looking for him. It wouldn't do to leave a trail of gold-pieces all over town; it was like handing hundred dollar bills to bus drivers—hardly the way to be inconspicious. But if there were some smaller coins in among the sovereigns. . . .

He concentrated, picturing silver pieces, then checked the contents of his pocket. Success! He selected a quarter, handed it to the girl, started for the door—

"Beg pardon, sir," the girl called after him. "Ye've give me furrin money—by mistake, I don't doubt. . . ."

He turned back, accepted the coin. Sure enough, a U. S. two-bit piece. "Sorry," he muttered; he took out a gold piece, handed it over. The girl oohed.

"Sir, have ye nothin' smaller?"

"Never mind; keep the change." He flashed her a quick smile, started out—

"But, sir! a whole sovereign! Wait half a sec; I'll pop across to Master Samuel's stall and—"

"Never mind; I'm . . . ah . . . in a hurry." Lafayette went up the steps, the girl behind him. "Ye must be daft, sir!" she called indignantly. "A sovereign fer tuppence 'orth o' cakes?"

People were staring. A lantern-jawed woman with a basket on her arm jerked as though someone had pulled a wire attached to her neck. She pointed.

"It's him!" she squawked. "Last night, at the grand ball—I seen the rascal, plain as I'm seeing him now, when I come in to trim the wicks—!"

Lafayette plunged past her, burst through a group of stout burghers munching sausages before a stall under a cloud of steam and the sharp odor of mustard,

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dashed down the slanting street, rounded a corner at a full run. Behind him a shout was rising; feet pounded in pursuit. He glanced back, saw a big-chested man in an open vest round the corner, hair flying, legs pumping —

He sprinted, bowled over a cart loaded with gimcracks and miniature pink-and-white Artesian flags, skidded into a narrow alley, pounded up a cobbled way toward the looming wall of a church. Someone shot from a side alley ahead, whirled, arms spread; Lafayette straight-armed him, jumped the sprawling body, emerged into an open court. There was an eight-foot wall rimming the yard. He ran for it, leaped, caught the top, pulled himself up and over, dropped into a tiny back yard where an old man trimming roses with a pair of heavy shears opened a toothless mouth as Lafayette bounded past him through a door, along a short dark hall redolent of wood smoke, and burst out onto a quiet side street. He paused a moment, took a deep breath, looked left and right—

The hunt rounded the corner half a block above, gave a shout as they saw him. He whirled, dashed off down the slope. If he could round the turn ahead in time to duck out of sight before they caught up. . . .

The street curved, widened into a plaza with a fountain surrounded by flower stalls and a dense throng of shoppers, vivid in the shafts of morning light pouring down past the cathedral towers. A picturesque view, he noted hastily; too bad he didn't have time to pause and enjoy it. There was an inviting street-mouth leading off to the left just ahead. He ducked into a crouch as he pushed in among the crowd; maybe they wouldn't pick him out in the press if he didn't stick up so high. People gave way before him as he worked his way through, back curved, neck bent. A motherly woman handed him a copper. A legless man seated under the lamp-post on the corner with a hat in his lap gave him a resentful look.

"Hey, buddy, you joined the union . . . ?"

O'Leary dodged past him, straightened, went up the street at a lope. The geography of the town, it occurred to him, was similar to that of Colby Corners. The main difference was that back home they'd levelled the ground; here the streets wound up and down over the little hills and valleys that in a less romantic clime were hammered into drab horizontality. The street he was now in was analogous to the alley running behind Pott's Drug Store and Hambanger's Hardware. That being the case, if he took a right just ahead, and an-

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other right, he'd hit the park—and maybe, among the trees and underbrush, he could lose his pursuers. He could hear them behind him, closing in again. He caught a glimpse as he rounded the corner: A big man with a pitchfork was in the lead now, running hard, gaining. Lafayette ran for the next turn, skidded into it, pelted uphill, saw the gap ahead where the buildings ended and the open green began. He leaped for the grass, threw himself flat behind a hedge, twisted to see the pursuit streaming past the mouth of the street, fifty feet below. Apparently nobody had noticed his dash for the park. Maybe he was safe here for awhile.

He moved back cautiously, worked his way behind the shelter of the hedge to a clump of arbor vitae thirty feet from the street, rested for a moment, then crawled inside the concealment of the ring of trees. It was quiet here, a green gloom of leaf-filtered sunlight. He settled himself on a carpet of piney mould and prepared to wait until dark. Apparently the story of his having invaded the Princess' bedroom had already spread all over town. Until he cleared up that little misunderstanding, there'd be no peace and quiet for him here.

A large, peach-colored crescent moon had risen behind the church towers before O'Leary emerged from his sanctuary. The streets, inadequately illuminated by the yellow gaslights at the corners, were deserted. A few small windows gleamed warm yellow and orange against the dark facades, shedding patches of light on the cobbles below. O'Leary moved along quickly across the park, found the high wall that surrounded the palace grounds. The palace itself, of course, was located in the same relative position as the YMCA back in Colby Corners. The gate was half a block ahead; he could see the sentry in his bearskin shako standing stiffly at parade rest before the narrow sentry box. No use trying to get through there; he'd be recognized in an instant.

O'Leary turned, set off in a direction opposite to that of the gate. Ten minutes later, in the deep shadow of a clump of tall elms growing just inside the wall, he looked carefully in both directions, then found finger-holds, scrambled up the wall, peered over the top. No guards were in sight. Cautiously, he pulled himself higher, threw a leg over, crouched astride the wall. Craning, he saw that the tree providing the shadow was too high to be of any help. He eyed the darkness below. The idea of jumping lacked appeal—

From below there was a sudden thump of feet, the unmistak-

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able rasp of a blade sliding from a sheath.

"Hold, varlet!" a hostile voice barked. Lafayette, startled by the sudden interruption, grabbed to retain his balance, missed, went over sideways with a choked yell. He saw the flash of light along a bared blade, had just an instant to picture himself impaled on it as he twisted aside, landed full on the man with an impact that knocked the breath from him. He rolled free, saw the watchman stretched on his back, out cold. Someone shouted—from the left, O'Leary thought; he came to his feet, struggling to breathe, staggered off in the direction of the deepest shadow. Running feet approached. O'Leary leaned against the three-foot trunk of the largest elm, drawing painful breaths.

"It's Morton," a squeaky voice piped. "Somebody clobbered him!"

"He cun't of went far," a deep voice boomed. "You check over that way, Hymie; I'll scout along here."

O'Leary tried to quiet his wheezing; he heard hoarse breathing, the whack of a sword-blade beating the bushes against the wall. He eased around the trunk as the searcher passed six feet away, then tiptoed away toward a growth of shrubbery across the path twenty feet distant.

"Grab him, Hymie!" the deep voice yelled from the other direction. Lafayette sprang into action, dived for cover, hit the dirt, wriggled through, rose to a crouch on the far side, scuttled for the shelter of an ornamental hedge—

Another man, looming tall in a floppy hat and boots, sprang from nowhere into his path, brandished a sword aloft, charged with a yell. O'Leary ducked aside, dashed for the hedge, rounded right end, leaped a marble bench, veered barely in time to miss the lily pool, scratched gravel crossing the wide path. There was a yell and splash behind him; the pursuer had misjudged the water hazard.

In the clear for the moment, O'Leary sprinted for the tall shadow of the palace, angling to the right to miss a pavilion glowing with strung lanterns. Judging from the yells, he had a dozen men on his trail now, mostly behind him, but some ahead, off to the right. If he could reach the shelter of the wall before they spotted him. . . .

Two men dashed into view ahead, skidded to a halt.

"They went that way!" O'Leary shouted. "After them!" The two newcomers whirled, dashed back out of sight. O'Leary veered sharply, reached a line of trees leading generally palaceward, pounded ahead. Not much

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farther; a wing of the massive building stretched out here toward the trees. O'Leary cleared the end of the row, raced for the refuge of the deep shadows ahead, saw a man back into view fifty yards distant, his attention on the bushes from which he had emerged. Lafayette put on a spurt, dived for the tangle of ivy against the palace wall just as the fellow turned.

"Hey! Here he is, boys!" the man yelled. O'Leary muttered curses, worked his way behind the trailing curtain of vines, forcing his way along against the rough-hewn stone blocks. Feet pelted past, and he froze; voices called near at hand. There was the clang of a blade thrust through the vines.

"We got him pinned down, men!" someone exulted. "Spread out. Work that ivy!" More clashing of metal against stone, coming closer. O'Leary moved cautiously, gained another foot. Tricky work, trying not to shake the vines. If he could just get past the corner—A projecting buttress blocked his way. He felt along its edge; the vine cover ended two feet along it. He was trapped—cornered. Unless. . . . O'Leary closed his eyes, remembering the palace lay-out. This was the southwest face of the building. He'd never been on this side of the palace, so it ought to be safe. . . .

He pictured a door, just a small one, set a foot or two above ground level. It was made of stout oak planks, weathered but sound, and it was secured by a hasp—a rusty one. Very rusty. It was concealed by the vines, of course, and led into a forgotten passage which led—somewhere. If he got that far he could play it by ear.

At the comforting jolt in the smooth flow of the universe, O'Leary opened his eyes, started feeling over the wall, as steel clashed less than ten feet away. His hands encountered wood, a rough frame, then the door, a squat entry four feet by five, with rust-scaled hinges and a massive padlock dangling from a corroded hasp. O'Leary let out his breath in a preliminary sigh of relief, pushed against the panel. It stirred, came up against the restraint of the hasp. He pushed harder; rusted screws tore out of the wood with a crunching sound.

"Hark, men! What's that?" Hands were tearing at the vines. O'Leary pushed at the resisting door, got it open a foot, slipped inside, forced it shut behind him. There was a mouldering beam lying on the floor; brackets to fit it were mounted on either side of the doorway. He lifted the timber, grunting, settled it into place as a hand slammed the oak from the outside.

"Hey, Sarge! A door! Look!" A muffled voice came through the

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barrier. More talk, thumps, then a heavy blow.

"He couldn'a got through there, ya dummy, it's locked."

"Hey—like if this guy's a sorcerer. . . ."

"Yeah, what's a locked door to a guy like that?"

O'Leary looked both ways along a narrow, low-ceilinged passage, closely resembling the one through which he had been led to Adoranne's room—less than twenty-four hours before, he realized with wonderment; it seemed like days. As for the passage, it was probably part of a system running all through the building. With a little luck, he'd be able to find his way back to the Princess' apartment and explain what had happened without having to venture out into the open—if he could keep his orientation.

He moved off, barely able to see by random glints of dim light filtering through chinks in the crudely mortared walls. The passage ran straight for twenty feet, then right-angled. There was a door a few feet beyond the turn. O'Leary tried the latch; it opened, revealed a wide, clean room, smoothly floored, crowded with bulky dark shapes the size of upright pianos. Along the left wall there was a complex pattern of highlights from massed dial faces, polished metal fittings. To the right, more panels, like computer programmer's consoles, were set under wide TV-type screens. The whole thing, O'Leary thought, looked like a blockhouse where a space shot was being readied. How did all this fit into the simple Artesian scene? True, threre were a few electric lights in the palace, and he had seen a number of clumsy mechanical devices in use—but nothing approaching the technology implied here. It didn't make sense—unless Nicodaeus knew something about it. O'Leary nodded to himself. That had to be it. There was definitely something fishy about the court magician. That candid camera he'd used, disguised as a lighter, for example. . . .

But this wasn't finding Adoranne. He closed the door, noting the thick metal plate bolted to it. It would take some doing to force your way past that. He went on along the passage, passed a heavy metal-clad door like a butcher's walk-in refrigerator. More modern devices. Maybe Nicodaeus had set it up and stocked it with foods in season, which he later miraculously produced. There was nothing like fresh frozen strawberries in the dead of winter to endear a sorcerer to a gourmet king.

Thirty feet past the refrigerator, the passage dead-ended. O'Leary thumped the walls, looking for concealed doors, then

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started back the way he had come and stopped dead at a sound from the darkness ahead.

He stood, head cocked, listening, aware of the musty odor of the dead air, the rasp of his own breathing. The sound came again —a soft scraping. He flattened himself against the wall. There was a movement—a stirring of shadows against the darkness. Something was coming toward him—something bulky, crouched, no more than waist-high. O'Leary tried twice, managed to swallow. No wonder the secret passages were deserted; ordinarily, he didn't believe in spectral ogres, but here in this forgotten passage under a castle in an unknown country called Artesia, anything seemed suddenly, appallingly, possible.

It was closer now, no more than two yards away, waiting there in the darkness. O'Leary pictured diabolical eyes studying him, goblin-fangs gaping. . . .

He fumbled in his pockets; he had no weapon—damned careless of him. But he couldn't just stand here and wait to be savaged; he'd rather attack in the blind, come to grips with—whatever it was. He took a deep breath, set himself—

"Hiya, Sir Lafayette," a bass voice rumbled. "What you doing down here?"

O'Leary jumped violently, cracking his head, slumped back against the wall, weak with relief

"Yockabump," he managed. "Fancy meeting you here."

CHAPTER VIII

"You're lucky I run into you," Yockabump was saying. "Duck your head now; low bridge."

Behind him, Lafayette maneuvered around a massive timber that half-blocked the cramped way. "You're so right," he agreed. "I never would have found that stairway. I wonder how many people know about all these hidden entrances into their rooms?"

"Not many."

"Well, next time I'm chased, at least I'll have somewhere to hide."

"There's some folks around here might say I shouldn't be helping you out," the dwarf said. "But once I put my money on a nag, I see her to the finish line."

"I can explain all that nonsense about me being in Her Highness's room," O'Leary started—

"Never mind, Sir Lafayette; I'm just the Court Jester; I supply the boffs and let the gentry work out their own problems. And like I said: I got confidence in you."

"I suppose you mean because of my ring—the axe and dragon—"

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"Nay, I don't go for that legend jazz. Anyway, that's just a story old Gory cooked up himself, back when he was new on the job. Propaganda, you know; people was restless. They kind of liked the old king, and who ever heard of this Cousin Goruble? There's still lots of folk think Her Highness ought to be setting on the throne right now—but like I says, I don't get mixed in politics."

"I take it King Goruble isn't too popular?"

"Ah, he's OK. Kind of strict, I guess, but you can't blame him, since this bird Lod made the scene—him and his pet dragon."

"More folklore, I take it?"

"Well—I never actually *seen* this dragon—"

"Hmmm. Funny how nobody I've met has seen it—but they all believe in it."

"Yeah—well, here we are." Yockabump had halted at a blank wall. "This here is the panel that opens into Her Highness's bedroom. I guess you know what you're doing—and I ain't going to ask you why you're going in there; when I trust a guy, I trust him all the way."

"Well, that's very decent of you, Yockabump. I have Her Highness's best interests at heart—"

"Sure—but look, Sir Lafayette; give me about five minutes to do a fade, OK? I don't want to be nowhere around in case anything goes wrong."

"If I'm captured, I won't implicate you, if that's what you mean."

"Good luck, Sir Lafayette," the rumbling voice breathed. There was a soft rustle, and O'Leary was alone. He waited, counting slowly to three hundred, then felt over the panel, found an inconspicuous latch at one side; it clicked as he flipped it up. The panel moved smoothly aside. He peered out into the dark room. Only a few hours ago, a hand had propelled him violently through the same opening; now he was back, sticking his head into the same noose, voluntarily. . . .

He stepped through onto the deep pile rug, made out the shape of the big canopied bed.

"Adoranne!" he whispered, moving forward softly. "Don't yell—it's me, Lafayette! I want to explain. . . ." His voice trailed off. Even in the dim moonlight filtering through the gauzy curtains at the high windows, he could see that the bed was empty.

A five-minute search confirmed that there was no one in the apartment. O'Leary stood by the ornately carved gold and white dressing table, feeling unaccountably let down. But after all, why should he have blandly assumed she'd be here? Probably there was a big party going on,

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and she was there, dancing with Count Alain—

But never mind that train of thought. It was time to go—before the fat lady-in-waiting came in and set up a howl. He went back to the inner doorway leading to the bedroom—and stopped short at the sound of voices. The door on the far side of the bedroom opened, and O'Leary ducked back as the maid came in, accompanied by an old man with a mop. The girl sniffled.

"It . . . it ain't . . . the same."

"Never mind that; tears won't help nothing. . . ."

O'Leary ducked across the room, tried the hall door. It opened. Cautiously he peeked out; the corridor was dim-lit, deserted. Strange. Uusally there were ceremonial—or perhaps not ceremonial—guards posted every fifty feet along the hall. And it was a little early for Nicodaeus' fifty volt lighting system to be turned down so dim. Still, all the better for nocturnal prowlers. He went along the carpeted corridor to the wide, ornate door, white with gold carving, that separated Adoranne's private quarters from the public area, tried the gleaming golden handle. It opened. He went through, started off toward the next room from which he could re-enter the secret passage system—

Someone was coming; low voices muttered. O'Leary ran for it, ducked down a side hallway, slid to a halt as he saw a guard posted at the next intersection. The man was yawning; he hadn't seen O'Leary. Just ahead lay a narrow door. O'Leary stepped quickly to it, opened it, ducked through. Steps led upward. He could go up, or back out into the hall. He paused with a hand on the door, hearing soft footfalls just outside. That narrowed the choice down; he turned and started up the winding stairs.

Five minutes later, winded by the climb, O'Leary reached a heavy door opening from a tiny landing at the top of the stairs. He listened, then tried the latch. The door opened noiselessly. He poked his head in, wrinkling his nose at a heavy stench resembling burnt pork that accompanied a dense cloud of greenish fumes boiling from an open pan set up on a tripod. Through the smoke he saw the tall figure of Nicodaeus, bent over a workbench, absorbed, his back to the door. O'Leary studied the narrow, granite-walled chamber, floored with vast stone slabs, lit by giant candles guttering on stands, its ceiling lost in shadows and cobwebs. There were cabinets, shelves, chests, all piled with stuffed owls, alarm clocks, old boots, bottles and jars and cans both full and empty; against the walls wooden crates

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were stacked, cryptic symbols stencilled on their sides in red and yellow and black. Along one side of the room ran a workbench, littered with tools, bits of wire, odd-shaped bits of metal and glass and plastic; above it was a black crackle-finish panel, set with dozens of round glass dials against which needles trembled. There were double doors at the far end of the room, half-concealed behind a heavy hanging. From the ceiling, a gilded human skeleton dangled from a wire.

O'Leary slipped inside, closed the door behind him, silently shot the bolt. The stench was really terrible. Lafayette concentrated, remembering his success with the goaty girl at the tavern. Roasted coffee, say; that would be a marked improvement. . . .

He felt the subtle jar that indicated success. The color of the smoke changed to a reddish brown; the greasy smell faded, to be replaced by the savory aroma of fresh-ground coffee beans.

Nicodaeus straightened, went across to the instrument display panel, jabbed at buttons. A small screen glowed pale green. The magician muttered, jotting notes —then paused, ball-point poised. He sniffed, whirled suddenly—

"Lafayette! Where did—how —what . . . ?"

"One question at a time, Nicodaeus! I had a hell of a time getting to you; the whole town's gone crazy. You don't have anything to eat handy, do you? I've been lying under a bush in the park all day—"

"Lafayette! My boy, you've repented! You've come to me to make a clean breast of it; tell me where you've hidden her! I'll go to His Majesty—"

"Hold it!" O'Leary sank down on a wobbly stool. "I haven't repented for anything, Nicodaeus! I told you—when I was locked in that crummy cell: somebody came to my room, told me Adoranne was in trouble, and led me into a secret passage. Then the double-crosser gave me a push and shoved some junk into my hand, and the lights went on—"

"Certainly, lad, and now you've decided to throw yourself on His Majesty's mercy—"

"You mean apologize for not letting him cut me into slices for something I didn't do? Ha! Look here, Nicodaeus: there's something funny going on around here. I want to see Adoranne and explain what happened. She thinks I stole her crown jewels or. . . ." He broke off, seeing the expression on the other's face. "What's the matter?" He came to his feet in sudden alarm. "She hasn't been hurt . . . ?"

"You mean—you really don't know?" Nicodaeus blinked through his rimless glasses.

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"Don't know what?" O'Leary yelled. "Where's Adoranne?"

Nicodaeus' shoulders slumped. "I had hoped you could tell *me* that, Lafayette. She's been missing since sometime before dawn. And everyone thinks you, my boy, are the one who stole her."

"You're all out of your minds," O'Leary said, finishing off a cracker with sardines—the only rations, it appeared, that Nicodaeus kept handy. "I was locked in a cell. How could I have kidnapped her? And why?"

"But you escaped from the cell. And as to why. . . ." Nicodaeus looked wise. "Need one ask?"

"Yes, one need ask! I'm not likely to drag a girl away in the middle of the night just to . . . just to . . . do whatever people do with girls they drag away in the middle of the night."

"But, Lafayette!" Nicodaeus twisted his hands together. "Everyone's assumed you were the kidnapper! If you aren't, then who . . . ?"

"I don't know who! You're supposed to be some kind of a magician; don't you have methods of finding out things?"

"*Now* who believes in magic?" Nicodaeus inquired sardonically. "No, Lafayette, my modest powers are unequal to the task. Her Highness has disappeared as thoroughly as though she'd been transported to another planet."

"Has old Goruble got a search going? Has he called out troops, set up roadblocks, pulled in all known criminals, posted a big reward—"

Nicodaeus held up his hands. "I don't know just what steps he's taken, Lafayette. I've been working here in my lab, trying to see what I could turn up. But it's no go, I'm afraid. We're up against a clever operator."

"You've got quite a lay-out here," O'Leary said. 'I'll bet it impresses the locals."

"It has its effect," Nicodaeus conceded, crossing to the panel. He picked up a clip-board and pen, began jotting notes as he studied the instruments, an anxious look on his face.

"What's all this?" O'Leary indicated the panel.

"A monitor station. Ah, that is, I'm conducting some, ah, studies in experimental cosmology; just a hobby, of course." The magician shot Lafayette a keen look. "By the way, I noted a severe energy drain recorded on the beta scale at six-fifteen this morning. Then about ten minutes later—that would be at six-twenty-five—there was the first of a series of lesser disturbances, that have continued at intervals all day."

"What are you measuring? Is this some sort of seismograph?"

Nicodaeus studied O'Leary's face. "See here, Lafayette—isn't

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worse than useless. His Majesty is in a towering rage—"

"I don't care what kind of a rage he's in. I do have a few angles, remember. I *did* get out of that cell, you know. If he'd let me help—"

"He'd have you cut down at first sight," Nicodaeus said firmly. "And me as well, for harboring you. There's a price on your head of a thousand gold sovereigns—that's over a hundred thousand dollars."

"That giant!" O'Leary said suddenly. "Cludd, or whatever his name was! Is there really any such ogre, or is he somebody's pet superstition, like the Phantom Highwayman and Goruble's dragon?"

"Oh, Lod exists; I can vouch for that, my boy. He visited the city, not a month ago. Thousands of people saw him; three meters tall, as broad as I can reach with both arms wide, and ugly as a wart hog!"

"Then he must be the one! Didn't they say he came here courting Adoranne? Then, when he was turned down, he planned this kidnapping—"

"And how, dear lad, would Lod —enormous, ungainly, with a price on his head and known to every subject in the country—slip into town, remove the princess from the midst of her guards, and get away clean?"

"Somebody did—and it wasn't me! There are secret passages in the palace, and I wouldn't be surprised if one of them didn't lead to a tunnel that would take you right outside the city walls. Now, I want a good horse—one that doesn't have any annoying habits like bucking. The book I read on horsemanship said—"

"But Lafayette, where would I get a horse?"

"You've got one waiting at the postern gate, remember? Don't stall, Nicodaeus! This is serious!"

"Oh, yes, *that* horse. . . . Mmmmm. Yes, perhaps. But—"

"Stop saying 'but'! Get me the horse and stock the saddlebags with food and a change of socks and . . . and whatever I might need. And don't forget a road map."

"Umm. Yes. Look here, Lafayette, you may be right. Lod *could* be the kidnapper. A difficult trip, though. Do you really intend to try, single-handed—"

"Yes—and I need help! You've double-crossed me a few times, but maybe that was just misguided loyalty. You *are* fond of Adoranne, aren't you?"

"Double-crossed? Why, Lafayette—"

"Will you help me?"

"Dear boy, out of my personal regard for you, I'll try to do what I can—"

There was a thunderous hammering at the door. Lafayette

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jumped. Nicodaeus whirled to him, pointed to the heavy hangings at the narrow end of the room.

"Quickly!" he whispered. "Behind the drapes!"

Lafayette sprang to the hiding place Nicodaeus had indicated, slipped behind the heavy hangings. There was a cold draft on his back. He turned, saw double-glass doors standing ajar. A tiny balcony was dimly visible in the darkness beyond them. He turned the handle, stepped out into cold night air and a light drizzle of icy rain.

"Swell," he muttered, huddling against the ivy-covered wall beside the door. Through a narrow gap in the draperies he could see the magician hurrying across the room, drawing the bolt. The door burst open and armed men pushed through: two, three, more. The word must have spread that he had gotten into the palace. Probably they were searching every room.

Two men were coming across toward the hangings behind which O'Leary had been hidden a minute before. He threw a leg over the iron railing, slid down, found a toe hold in the tangled vines beneath the balcony, his eyes at floor level. Through the glass door, he saw a sword-blade plunge through the drapes, stabbing through the heavy cloth. The point struck the door and glass broke with a light tinkle. O'Leary ducked down, clambered in close under the shelter of the overhang of the balcony, gripping the wet vines. Above, the doors crashed wide. Boots crunched glass above his head.

"Not out here," a gruff voice said.

"I told you—" The rest of Nicodaeus' speech was cut off by the clump of boots, the slamming of doors. Lafayette held on, shivering in the cold wind; water dripped from the end of his nose. He looked down. Below, there was nothing but darkness, the drumming of rain, heavier now. Not a very enticing climb, but he couldn't stay here.

He started down, groping for footholds on the wet stone, clinging to the stiff vines with hands that were rapidly growing numb. Wet leaves jabbed at his face, dribbled water down inside his sodden jacket.

Twenty feet below the level of the balcony, he found a horizontal stone coping, followed it along to the corner. The wind was stronger here, buffeting against him, driving stinging rain into his eyes. He retreated, traversed to the opposite side of the tower. He was about fifteen feet above the slanting copper-green plates of the roof over the main residential wing now. He'd have to descend, get past the eaves, and then make it to the ground without

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being seen. Far below, torches moved about the gardens; faint shouts rang out. The Palace Guards was out in force tonight.

It was a tricky climb down from the ledge to the roof below; only the thick-growing vines made it possible. O'Leary reached the roof, braced himself with one foot in the heavy copper gutter, now gurgling with run-off from the gable above, rested five minutes. Then he gripped the vines firmly, lowered himself out and over the wide overhang of the roof. He swung his legs, groping for support, found nothing. The vines here were sparser than above; probably they had been thinned to clear the downspout. He let himself down another foot, the edge of the roof was at chin level now. He tried again, failed to find a foot hold. The strain on his icy hands was getting a bit tiresome. He slipped farther down, hanging at arm's length now, ducked his head under the overhang. The face of the building was a good three feet distant —and as bare of ivy as a billboard. There was a window there, six feet to the left—but it was dark, shuttered, and out of reach even if it had been wide open. O'Leary grunted, hitched himself along to the left. Quite suddenly, he was aware of the hundred feet of empty night air yawning below him. Was this where he was going to end, after all? His hands were stiffening up; he couldn't tell if he was gripping the vines hard, or if his hold was weakening, slipping. . . .

With a desperate surge, O'Leary swung his legs, managed to slam one toe against the boarded window. Out of reach; he couldn't make it. Could he go back? He struggled to pull himself up, felt the edge of the roof cutting into his wrists; he kicked his legs vainly, then hung slackly. *Maybe five minutes,* he thought. *Then my grip will loosen and down I'll go.* . . .

Abruptly, the shutters on the window emitted a clank, swung open. A pale, frightened face looked out, framed by dark hair—

"Daphne!" O'Leary croaked. "Help!"

"Sir Lafayette!" Her voice was a gasp. She thrust the shutter back and the wind caught it, thumped it against the stone. Daphne stretched out her arms. "Can you—can you reach me . . . ?"

O'Leary summoned his strength, swung his foot; Daphne grabbed, caught it; the buckled shoe came off in her hand. She tossed it behind her, brushed back a strand of hair with the back of her hand, leaned farther out.

"Again!" she said. O'Leary sucked in air, swung himself back, kicked out; the chambermaid's strong fingers gripped his

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ankle. She leaned back, pulled his lower leg across the sill, then grabbed, caught the other foot as it swung forward. O'Leary felt his grip going as the girl tugged. He gave himself a last thrust; his hands came free, and he was swinging down—

His back slammed the wall with a thud that knocked the wind from his lungs. Dizzily, he gripped upward, caught the sill with one hand; Daphne seized his arm, tumbled him inside.

"You're . . . strong for a . . . girl . . . ," O'Leary managed. "Thanks. . . ."

"Comes of swinging a broom all day, sir," she said breathlessly. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. How'd you happen to be there at just the right moment?"

"I heard the outcry above; I ran up to Nicodaeus' tower to see what was afoot. The guardsmen were in a pet, dashing all about and cursing. Nicodaeus whispered to me it was you—that you'd gone over the balcony rail. I thought maybe I could catch a glimpse of you from the window—if you hadn't fallen, that is . . . and—"

"Look, Daphne—you saved my life. But—" he frowned, remembering his last conversation with the girl. "Why aren't you in jail?"

"King Goruble pardoned me. He was quite sweet about it, said a child like me couldn't be guilty; he wouldn't even let them hold a hearing—"

"Well, the old grouch has a few redeeming traits, after all." O'Leary got to his feet, rubbing his lacerated wrists. "Listen, Daphne, I have to get out of here. It's a bit too hot for me right now. I've just heard about Adoranne's kidnapping, and I—" He broke off. "*You* didn't think I was mixed up in that, did you?"

"I . . . I didn't know, sir. I'm glad if you're not. Her Highness is so lovely, though, and a gentleman like you. . . ." She looked at her feet.

"A gentleman like me doesn't resort to kidnapping to get a girl. But I think I may have a lead. If you'll get me to one of the entries to the hidden passage system, I'll try to follow it up."

"Hidden passages, sir?"

"Sure—they run all through the palace. There are entries from just about every room in the building. Where are we now?"

"This is an unused storeroom, just down the hall from the suite of the Earl of Nussex."

"Is he in?"

"No, sir; he's off with some of the troops searching for Her Highness."

"That'll do, then."

He found his shoe, put it on, followed as Daphne checked the corridor, led him along to a locked door which she opened with

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one of the keys on the ring at her waist. He took her hand.

"By the way, you don't happen to know the location of Lod's headquarters, do you?"

"In the desert to the west."

"Um. That's all anyone seems to know. Thanks for everything, Daphne." He leaned and pecked her smooth cheek.

"Where will you go?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"To find Lod."

"Sir—will you be safe?"

"Sure—wish me luck."

"G-good luck, sir."

He slid inside the room, crossed to the panel Yockabump had pointed out to him earlier, stepped through into close, musty darkness.

Two hours later, O'Leary was in a twisting alley-way under the shadow of the city wall three-quarters of a mile from the palace grounds, sheltering in the lee of a tumble-down shack, breathing hard from the climb, the dash from one covering shrub to another across the wide palace lawns, the sprint through the gate while the sentry investigated a sound made by a thrown pine-cone, the rapid walk through the streets to this noisome corner of the city slum. He was soaked to the skin, shivering, his hands cut and scratched, by the vines and the crawling he had had to do. Yesterday's bruises still ached, and the scant meal Nicodaeus had given him hardly sufficed to assuage the pangs of a day's fast.

It was raining harder now. O'Leary felt his teeth clatter; his bones felt like something rudely chipped from ice. At this rate he'd have pneumonia before morning—particularly if he spent the night standing out in the chill, raw wind.

He couldn't knock at a door and ask for shelter; every citizen in town seemed to know him. The clever thing to do would be to abandon this foolishness, shift back to Colby Corners and his room, and get what sleep he could. Tomorrow he could call Mr. Biteworse, explain his absence as being due to a sudden attack of flu. . . .

But what about Adoranne? He pictured her waking up to find someone's hand over her mouth. He would have gotten in via the secret passage, of course. He would have gagged her, bound her hand and foot, slung her over a hard shoulder, carted her off to some robber hideout—

He couldn't abandon her. He might fail, but he couldn't leave without trying. But what could he do? At the moment he was a hunted fugitive with no one to turn to. His only friend, Nicodaeus, had been suspiciously quick about letting the soldiers in—and they'd rushed directly to

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his hiding place; if he hadn't climbed outside, prompted by some obscure instinct, he'd have been run through. Had the magician deliberately betrayed him? What reason would he have? True, he'd been eager to see the last of O'Leary; all that talk about fast horses at the postern gate—but then he *had* helped him at the trial. . . .

Well, ally or betrayer, Nicodaeus was beyond his reach now. He'd been lucky to get clear of the palace. The outcry inside had drawn off most of the guard force, fortunately, so he hadn't had to lie low in the mud more than half a dozen times before reaching the gate. He wiped his muddy palms on his sodden trousers, shivered again. Briefly, he thought of conjuring up the image of the princess locked in the nearest hut, say. . . . He could break in the door, and there she'd be. . . .

It was no use. He didn't believe it. He was too tired to conjure up the impossible. She was miles from here, and he knew it. He needed food, warmth, sleep; then perhaps he could make his mind work again. But standing here philosophizing wasn't helping. Maybe he could do something about that. He looked at the sagging structure against which he huddled. It was a shed no more than six feet by eight, with a roof of sodden thatch. The door was a battered agglomeration of mismatched boards, held together by a pair of rotted iron straps, hanging crookedly from one leather hinge. He prodded it; it slumped even farther; O'Leary caught a glimpse of a dark interior—

He looked away quickly; no point in making *that* mistake again. There was no telling what that rude exterior might house—or be made to house. Perhaps it was a secret hideaway, fitted out by some adventurer with a need for private quarters away from the hubbub of busy streets—well camouflaged, of course. . . .

No use carrying the rationalization too far, O'Leary reminded himself; firmly, he pictured sound walls under the mouldering slabs, a snug, water-proof roof concealed by the defunct thatch, a weather-proof door, an adequate heating system—a gas-fire with artificial logs, perhaps, fed by bottled propane. Add a rug—cold floors were rough on bare feet—a shower stall with plenty of hot water—there'd been a shortage of that, even in the palace—a tiny refrigerator, well-stocked, a bunk—a wide one, with a good quality mattress. . . .

O'Leary completed his mental picture, filling in the details with loving attention. Of course, it was there, he told himself; he needed a hideout—

Time seemed to hesitate for an

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instant; O'Leary smiled grimly and reached for the door. . . .

Half an hour later, with the door locked firmly against intruders, clean and warm after a shower—with plenty of hot water—O'Leary finished off his second Bavarian ham on Swiss rye, quaffed the last of the 16 ounce bottle of lager, pulled the feather comforter up snug about his ears, and settled down to catch up on some much needed rest.

The alarm clock he had throughtfully provided woke him with chimes at dawn. He stretched, yawned, blinked at the glass door to the shower stall, the pale green walls, the olive-carpeted floor, the dark-green wall-mounted refrigerator, the cheery fire on the hearth. Now, just where was he? There was Mrs. MacGlint's—or had that been an evil dream? And his room at the palace, and the bunk in the cell at the police station—and a room with a flowerpot . . . and oh, yes: the converted hut here. Quite cozy, he nodded approvingly. He was always waking up in different places these days, it seemed. O'Leary threw back the coverlet, checked the refrigerator, nibbled a cold chicken leg, then showered while sorting out kaliedoscopic impressions of the day before. It was getting harder and harder to recall just what had been a dream and what hadn't—or whether there was any distinction. The visit to the palace, now; had that been real? He looked at his hands. They were badly scraped. Uh-huh, that had been real, all right. Nicodaeus had nearly gotten him killed, the skunk—unless it was S.O.P. to run swords through curtains first thing when searching a room.

And Adoranne was gone, kidnapped. That was the important fact. He'd have to do something about that, right away. Funny how different everything seemed in the morning, with a meal and a night's sleep behind him. He wasn't worried. Somehow he'd figure out a way to straighten out this situation. He'd recover Adoranne, explain the business of the midnight visit and the bag of loot, and then. . . . Well, then he could play it by ear. And now to business.

He tried the door to the clothes-press, discovered a handsome outfit consisting of modern-style whipcord riding breeches, a heavy grey flannel shirt, cordovan boots, a short, lined windbreaker, a pair of pigskin driving gloves, and—incongruously—a rapier in a businesslike sheath attached to a western-style leather belt. He dressed, quickly fried three eggs and half a dozen strips of bacon, washed up, considered turning off the fire and decided

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against it; it might as well be warm when and if he needed emergency quarters again—and after all, it was free.

Outside, the rain had stopped. O'Leary closed the door carefully behind him. The shack, he noted with approval, looked as derelict as ever. Now to action. The first step. . . .

He paused, standing in the garbage-strewn dawn-lit alley. What *was* the first step? Where did Lod stay when he wasn't off on a raid? What was it they had said? In the desert to the west? Not much in the way of travel directions. He had to have more information—and he couldn't just collar a passer-by. The first question put to a local citizen would have the pack howling on his heels again before he could say "post-hypnotic suggestion."

Heavy boots clumped along the alley, coming closer. O'Leary made a move to duck into concealment—

Too late! A heavily-built man in a greasy sheepskin jacket hove into view, halted at sight of him. Under the damp brim of a wide, shapeless hat, a battered face stared truculently. Then it broke into a crafty, gap-toothed smile.

"Duh Phantom Highwayman!" the newcomer squeaked. "Thay, am I glad to thee *you!* I wanted to thay thanks fer handing the copperth a bum thteer the other night. I don't know how youse thwung it, but they didn't theem to know me from Adam'th off oxth!"

"Oh, it's the Red Bull," O'Leary said cautiously. "Ah, glad to help out. Well, I have to run along now—"

The red-head's smile got even crookeder. He sauntered closer. "I hear you're duh one dat thnatched duh princeth. Is dat duh thraight goodth?"

"What, you, too? I had nothing to do with it. I've got an idea this fellow Lod is the guilty party. Maybe you can tell me. Exactly where are his headquarters?"

"Youse can level wit' me, bo. I got contacth; we'll work togedduh and thplit duh take—"

"Forget it. Now about Lod's hideout—"

"I get it. Youse figger to thell Her Highneth to duh Bog Boy. What youse figger thyee'll bring?"

"Listen to me you, you numbskull!" O'Leary shook a fist under the flattened nose. "I'm not involved in the kidnapping! I'm not selling her to anybody! And I'm not interested in any shady deals with you!"

Red Bull's thick finger prodded O'Leary's chest. "Oh, thtingy, huh? Well, lithen to me, bo—what'th duh idea of working my thection of town, anyway? You thtick to yer highwayth, and leave duh thity to me, thee? And

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I'm cutting mythelf in on duh thnatch caper, thee? And—"

"There ithn't any thnatch caper—Oh, for heaven's sake, stop lisping! You've got me doing it!"

"Huh? Look, bo. . . ." The Red Bull's voice dropped abruptly to its accustomed bass. "Yuh split wit me or I cave in yer mush—and den call copper fer duh reward an' a free pardon—maybe even a small title an' a estate er two—"

O'Leary slapped the prodding finger aside. "Tell me where Lod's hideout is, you dimwit, and stop babbling about—"

A large hand gathered in the front of O'Leary's new jacket, lifted him to his toes.

"Who yuh calling a dimwit, bo? I got as good a mind as duh next gazebo—"

"I happen to be the next gazebo," O'Leary said in a voice somewhat choked by the pressure at his throat. "And I'm an idiot—for standing here chinning with you while there's work to be done—" He brought up a hand and chopped down in a side-of-the-palm blow at the base of the Red Bull's thick neck; the grasp on his shirt relaxed as O'Leary delivered a second hearty stroke across the big man's throat that sent him stumbling back. The Red Bull shook his head, roared, started for O'Leary with ape-like arms outstretched, met an

idedo kick in the pit of the stomach that doubled him over with a grunt in time to intercept a hard knee coming up to meet his already blunted features. He stumbled aside, one hand on his stomach and the other grasping his bleeding nose.

"Hey, dat's no fair!" he stated. "I never seen duh udder two guys!"

"Sorry. That was in Lesson Three, Unarmed Counter Attack. Worked quite well. Now, how about telling me where I can find Lod? And hurry up—this is important!"

"Lod, huh?" The Red Bull looked disapprovingly at the blood on his hand, moved his head ginger-

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ly, testing his neck. "What kind of a split yuh got in mind?"

"No split! I just want to rescue Her Highness!"

"How about forty-sixty, and I t'row in a couple o' reliable boys to side yer play wit' Lod?"

"Forget it. I'll ask somebody else." O'Leary straightened his jacket, rubbed his bruised hand, gave the Red Bull a disgusted look and started off up the alley.

"Hey!" The Red Bull trotted to his side. "I got a idea!"

"Well?" O'Leary kept walking.

"We split thoidy-seventy; what could be more gennulmanly dan dat?"

"You amaze me; I didn't know you knew that much arithmetic."

"I taken a night course in business math. How about it?"

"No! Get lost! I have things to do! I'm conspicuous enough without Gargantua padding along at my heels!"

"I'll settle for a lousy ten per cent, on account of you got such a neat left hand, and duh knee work was nice, too—"

"Go away! Depart! Dangle! Be missing! Get hence! Avaunt thee, varlet! No deal!" A small man probing hopefully in a sodden garbage bin gave O'Leary a look as the two passed.

"You're attracting attention!" O'Leary halted. "Listen, I give in. You're just too smart for me. Now here's the plan: Meet me an hour before moonrise at, uh—"

"How about duh One-Eyed Man on duh West Post Road?"

"Sure—just the place I had in mind. Wear a red carnation and pretend you don't know me until I sneeze nine times and then blow my nose on a purple bandana. Got it?"

"Dat's duh way to talk, bo! Nuttin' I like better'n a slick plan, all worked out wit' snazzy details an' all. Uh . . . by duh way, where do I get duh carnation, at dis time o' year?"

O'Leary closed his eyes, concentrated briefly. "Just around the next turn—on top of the first garbage bin on the left."

The Red Bull nodded, eyeing Lafayette a trifle warily.

"Sometimes when youse ain't in such a hurry, pal, I want youse should clue me how yuh work some of dese angles."

"Sure," O'Leary said. "Hurry along now, before someone steals your flower." The Red Bull hustled away along the street; O'Leary turned into a side alley to put distance between himself and his volunteer partner. He'd like to know himself how he worked the angles, he reflected. He was beginning to take all this as seriously as though it were all really happening; it was becoming increasingly difficult to remember which was the illusion, Artesia, or Colby Corners.

In a small cafe consisting of a faded striped awning over a

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patch of cracked sidewalk, Lafayette sipped a thick mug of strong coffee. He had to have the location of the rebel HQ— but any question on the subject would immediately point the finger at him. As a matter of fact, the girl behind the charcoal stove where the water boiled was giving him sidelong glances right now. Maybe it was just sex appeal, but he couldn't afford to take the chance. He rose abruptly and moved on. His best bet was to keep moving and hope to overhear something.

It was a long day. O'Leary spent it wandering idly through open-air markets, browsing in tiny bookshops, watching the skillful, gnarled hands of silversmiths and goldsmiths and leather and wood workers as they plied their crafts in stalls no bigger than the average hot-dog stand back home in Colby Corners. He ate a modest lunch of salami and ale at an inn where low-sagging foot-square beams black with soot and decorated with horse-brasses crossed above an uneven packed-earth floor. An hour before sunset he was near the Eastern Gate, pretending to eye the display in a tattoo-artist's window while keeping an eye on a lounging sentry who gave him no more than a casual glance. It would be no trick at all to slip through, if he just knew where to go from there. . . .

A large man standing a few yards away was giving him careful scrutiny from the corner of a red-rimmed eye. O'Leary whistled a few bars of Mairzy Dotes with suddenly dry lips, eased around the corner into an alley-like passage. It was dark here. He stepped along briskly, looked back to see only looming shadows. He went on, following twists and turns. The last of the light was rapidly fading from the sky. The alley abruptly ended in a garbage strewn court. He cast about, found another narrow way leading off into blackness, ducked into it and turned to see a dark figure, then another, step into dim view. He turned silently, started off at a trot. He had gone twenty feet when he tripped over a tub of refuse, sent it clattering. At once, there was a rasp of feet breaking into a run. By instinct, O'Leary ducked, threw himself aside as a dark cloaked figure slammed past, tripped, fell with a clangor of steel and a choked-off curse. Lafayette crouched, squinting into the dark, saw the man come to hands and knees, groping for a dropped weapon. It was no time for niceties, Lafayette told himself. He took a quick step, planted a solid kick to the side of the jaw. The man skidded to his face, lay still. O'Leary moved off up the alley scanning the way for other members of the reception com-

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mittee. There had been at least two of them—maybe more. This would be an excellent place to get away from—fast. But there was no point in running into the waiting arms of an assassin . . . .

A shadow moved against deeper shadow ahead. One of the party, it seemed, had circled to cut him off. O'Leary stooped, picked up a hand-filling cobblestone, stood flat against the wall. The shadow came closer. O'Leary could hear hoarse breathing now. He waited; the man came on, staring into the shadows, not noticing O'Leary.

"Hold it right there," O'Leary hissed. "I've got a musket aimed at your left kidney. Put down your weapon and stand where you are."

The man was standing like a wax figure illustrating Guilt Caught in the Act. He stooped slowly, put down something that glittered in the moonlight, took a hesitant step.

"That's close enough," O'Leary breathed. "How many of you are there?"

"Huh? Uh, well—"

"Whisper, damn you!"

"Just me—and Moe—and, and Charlie, and Sam and Pork-eye and Clarence—"

"Clarence?"

"Yeah; he's a new boy, just learning the trade—"

"Where are they?"

"Spotted around front. Hey, how'd you get past 'em, bud?"

"Easy. I went over them. How did you happen to be staked out here?"

"Well, after all, you had to try one of the gates if you planned to get clear of the city."

"How did you know I was still in the city?"

"Look here, fellow—you expect me to rat on my own chief? I'm not saying any more."

"All right; there's just one more thing I want from you: Where's Lod's headquarters located?"

"Lod? Out west someplace. How do I know?"

"You'd better know, or I'll be annoyed; and when I get annoyed my finger gets twitchy."

"Yeah," the man said quickly. "Uh, keep calm, chum. Lod, huh? Well, let's see. . . ."

"Quit stalling!"

"OK, what the heck, everybody knows where Lod hangs out, anyway, so I guess if I don't tell you, somebody else will, so what's the percentage in me being a hero, know what I mean?"

"Last chance. The finger is getting nervous."

"Ride west—you'll hit the desert after half a day's travel. Keep going. There'll be a line of mountains to your left. Follow the foothills till you come to the pass. That's all." O'Leary thought he heard a snicker.

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"What comes after the pass?"

"Don't worry; you'll see it all when you get there."

"How far is Lod's stronghold from the pass?"

"Maybe five miles, maybe ten, due west. You can't miss it—if you get that far."

"Why shouldn't I get that far?"

"Let's face it, pal; we got you outnumbered five to one—"

O'Leary took a quick step, slammed the five-pound stone in his hand against his informant's skull just above the ear. He folded silently, lay on his face snoring gently. O'Leary stepped past him, moved off up the alley, emerged five minutes later half a block from the East Gate. Ready to duck and run if necessary, he strolled past the guard just as the fellow yawned, showing cheap silver fillings. Once past him, O'Leary let out a long breath, set out to circle the town. His feet were already getting sore; the new boots had a tendency to pinch. Too bad he hadn't taken the time to steal a horse. He had a long trek ahead: maybe three miles around the town walls, then ten to the desert, then another ten. . . .

Well, there was no help for it—and thinking about blisters didn't help. He settled down for the hike ahead, watching the moon rise above the castellated city wall.

There was a light ahead, glowing in the window of one of the buildings huddled against the wall near the West Gate. Lafayette made his way to it, clambered over a heap of rubbish, came around to the front that faced the twenty-foot wide dirt road that led off to the west. He was ready for a good meal and a bottle of stout ale before he tackled the long night's walk ahead. The lighted shack seemed to be an inn; nailed to a post was a sign bearing an horrendous portrait of a bush-bearded pirate with a patch over one eye. It wasn't a prepossessing establishment, but it would have to do.

Lafayette pushed through the door, found himself in a surprisingly cosy interior; there were tables to the left, a bar straight ahead, a gaming area to the right where half a dozen grizzled gaffers were arguing querulously over a checkerboard. Oil lanterns on the bar lent a warm light to the scene. O'Leary rubbed his chilled hands together, took a seat. A vastly fat woman wobbled from a shadowy corner, plunked a heavy pewter mug in front of him.

"What'll it be, love?" she demanded cheerfully. O'Leary ordered roast beef and baked potato, sampled the beer. Not bad at all. He'd stumbled into a pretty fair eating place, it seemed—

"Hey, youse is late, Bo," a

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familiar voice rasped in O'Leary's ear. He jerked around. A red face with flattened features looked at him reproachfully. "I been waiting around dis dump fer a hour—"

"Listen here, Red Bull," O'Leary said quickly. "I told you not to speak to me until I blew my nose six times and, uh, waved a red handkerchief."

"Naw, youse said you'd sneeze nine times and blow yez'r schnozz on a poiple hanky—"

"Oh, ah, sure; I was just testing you—"

"An' look, I got my red carnation; kind uh wilted, but—"

"It's the coolest, Red. I can see our partnership is going to be a fruitful one. Now, I have further instructions for you. Just go along to the palace; most of the guard force is away looking for the princess. You can sneak inside without much trouble, and gather in all kinds of loot before they get back."

"But duh city gates is locked —"

"Climb over the wall."

"Yeah—dat's a nifty idear—but what about my horse? He ain't so good at climbing."

"Hmmm. Tell you what I'll do, Red—I'll take care of him for you."

"Say—dat's white of yuh, Bub. He's hitched out back. Now, where'll we meet?"

"Well—just stick around the palace gardens; there's good cover there. We'll rendezvous under a white oleander at the second dawn."

"Duh scheme sounds slick, Chum. By duh way, what'll youse be doing in duh meantime?"

"I'll be scouting some new jobs."

The Red Bull rose, gathered his cloak about his broad frame. "OK. I'll see youse in duh hoosegow." He turned and strode off. The waitress stared after him as she clanked O'Leary's platter down before him.

"Hey, ain't that the well-known cut-purse and footpad—"

"Shhh. He's a secret agent of His Majesty," O'Leary confided. The woman looked startled and withdrew. Half an hour later, well-fed and with three large beers inside him, O'Leary mounted the Red Bull's horse—a solidly-built bay with a new-looking saddle—and, keeping in mind all he'd read about the equestrian art, spurred out of the inn-yard and off along the West Post Road.

CHAPTER IX

By dawn, O'Leary had crossed the fertile miles of plain west of the capital, passing tiny villages and lonely farmhouses sleeping in the night, and now, far ahead, he could see a smoky-blue line of rocky peaks catching the first light of morning. The verdant

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green of tilled fields had given way to dry-looking pasture spotted with scrubby trees, under which a few lean cattle stood listlessly. He rode up a final slight slope, the dust of the road rising like stirred talcum powder now, leaned aside from the raking branches of thorn trees beside the trail, and looked out across an arid expanse of pale terracotta colored clay. He halted, frowning. Somehow he had expected to encounter some sort of warning before reaching the desert—a saloon with a sign reading Last Chance Charlie's or something of the sort, where he could buy some supplies for the long ride still ahead. Instead, here he was, already worn out from an unaccustomed night in the saddle—the book hadn't mentioned blisters on the thighs—facing the desert—and he was already beginning to get hungry again, he noticed. He jogged on, thinking of food. Taffy, now. That was nourishing, compact, durable. O'Leary felt the glands at the side of his jaws ache at the thought. Beautiful, tawny, delicious taffy. Funny how he'd never really gotten enough taffy. Back in Colby Corners you could buy it in any desired amount at Schrumph's Confectionary, but somehow he'd always felt a little foolish walking in and asking for it. That was one thing he'd correct as soon as he got back; he'd lay in a larger stock of taffy and eat it whenever he felt like it.

He squinted across the hazy flat ahead, concentrating on the idea of saddlebags well stocked with good, mouth-watering, nourishing food. All he had to do was dismount, open them up, and there it would be. Concentrated rations that wouldn't suffer from the desert heat, enough to last him for—oh, say a week.

There was a tiny jar—the familiar sense of a slipped gear in the cosmic machinery. O'Leary smiled. OK, he was set now. He'd ride on a mile or so into the desert, just to give himself a clear view of the trail behind so that no one could sneak up on him, and then he'd enjoy a long-delayed meal.

It was hot out here. O'Leary twisted, riding in a sort of half side-saddle position to ease the pain in his seat. The early sun was beating on his back, reflecting into his eyes from every projecting rock and desert plant. Too bad he hadn't thought to equip himself with a pair of Ray-Bans—and a hat would have helped, too; a wide-brimmed cowboy model. He reined in, turned in the saddle and looked back, squinting into the sun. Aside from his own trail of hoofprints and the settling dust of his passage, no sign of human life marred the expanse of dusty sand. It was as though the world ended

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a mile or two behind, where the low plateau met the dazzle of the morning sky. Not a very choice spot for a picnic, but the pangs were getting bothersome. He swung stiffly down from the saddle, unbuckled the strap securing the flap on the left-hand saddle-bag, groped inside, brought out a cardboard box. There was a bright wrapper showing a plate of golden-brown goodies.

AUNT HOOTY'S BEST SALT WATER TAFFY, O'Leary read delightedly. Well, that would make a fine dessert, but first, the more staple portions of the feast. He reached again, lifted out a number 6 can. TAFFY KING was lettered across the curve of the label, above an illustration of brightly-wrapped candies. He dropped it back in, came out with a familiarly-shaped tin. SAILOR SAM'S SALT WATER SARDINES the purple print announced, and beneath in small red letters: Finest Pure Taffy Confections. The next container was a square box containing Old Fashioned Taffy, a Treat for Young and Old. O'Leary swallowed hard, dropped the box, probed for another; came up with a dozen eggs—chocolate-covered, taffy inside.

The other saddle-bag produced a five-pound tin of taffy, a large gob of taffy artfully shaped to resemble a small ham, three square cans of Olde Style Taffy Like Mother Used to Make, a flat plug of Country Taffy—Pulled by Contented Clods, and a handful of loose taffies wrapped in cellophane lettered Taffy Kisses: Sweet as a Lover's Lips.

O'Leary looked over the loot ruefully. Not what you'd call a balanced diet; still, it could have been worse. After all, he *did* like taffy. He sat down in the shade of the horse and started in.

It was worse after that, riding on under the vertical rays of the late morning sun, his soreness stiffening into pain that made him wince at every jolt of the animal's hooves, his mouth puckered with the cloying taste of candy, his stomach feeling as though a dollop of warm mud had been dropped into it. His fingers were sticky with taffy, and the corners of his mouth were gummed with it. Ye Gods! Why hadn't he dwelt on the idea of ham sandwiches or fried chicken, or even good old Tend-R Nood-L! And it would have been clever of him to have supplied himself with a canteen while he had the chance.

Well, he was committed to the venture, ill-prepared though he was. There was no turning back now; the cops would be out in force after the fiasco at the alley. Nicodaeus had shown his colors; he could reduce the tally

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of his friends here in Artesia from one to zero. Still, when he came riding back with Adoranne before him, all would be forgiven. That part of the trip would be a little more fun than this. She'd have to sit snuggled up close, of course, and naturally he'd have to have at least one arm around her—to steady her. Her golden hair would nestle just under his chin, and he'd ride slowly, so as not to fatigue Her Highness, and it would take all day, and maybe they'd have to spend a night, rolled up in a blanket—if he had a blanket—by a little campfire, miles from anywhere—

But right now it was hot, dusty, itchy, and exceedingly uncomfortable. Ahead, the line of peaks showed as a saw-toothed ridge, angling in from the left, marching on without a break to the horizon. Keep going until he reached the pass, the cop had said back at the alley—not that he could depend on the fellow's directions. But there was nothing to do now but keep going and and hope for the best.

The sun was low over the mountains to the west, a ball of dusty red in a sky of gaudy purple and pink, against which a clump of skinny palm trees stood out in stark silhouette. O'Leary rode the last few yards to the oasis, plodded in under the parched trees, reined in. The horse moved impatiently under him, stepped on past a low, half-fallen wall, dropped his head to a dark pool, drank thirstily. O'Leary eased an aching leg over the saddle, lowered himself to the ground. He felt, he decided, like an Egyptian mummy buried astride his favorite charger, and just now unearthed by nosy archaeologists. He hobbled to a spot on the bank of the pond, got awkwardly to his knees, and plunged his head under the surface. The water was warm, a little brackish, and not without a liberal sprinkling of foreign particles; but these trifles detracted hardly at all from the exquisite pleasure of the moment. He scrubbed his face, soaked his hair, swallowed a few gulps, then rose and tugged the horse away from the water.

"Can't have you foundering, old boy, whatever that is," he told the patient beast. "Too bad you can't enjoy taffy—or can you?" He rooted in the bag, unwrapped a Taffy Kiss; the horse nuzzled it from his palm.

"Bad for your teeth," O'Leary warned. "Still, since it's all there is, old fellow, it'll have to do."

He turned to the rolled bundle behind the saddle, unstrapped it, found that it consisted of a thin blanket with holes and a weather-beaten tent, with four battered pegs and a jointed pole; the Red Bull's equipage left much

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to be desired. Fifteen minutes later, with the patched canvas erected and a final taffy eaten, O'Leary crawled inside, shaped a hollow in the sand for his hip, curled up on his side and was instantly asleep.

He awoke sitting bolt upright, listening. The only sounds were a soft whine of wind under the edge of the canvas and the tiny patter of blown sand. Still, something had aroused him. . . .

He reached quietly for his sword in its scabbard, poked his head out and gazed across the desolate wasteland, cold now in the early morning, but with a promise of heat in the huge sun, just rising through the palms. A few yards away, his horse stood with dragging reins, cropping patiently at the sparse blades of grass that sprouted here and there. O'Leary got to his feet, stretched, squinted toward the line of distant mountains. They weren't so distant, now; maybe ten miles to the nearest point, he guessed. He'd be there by noon. Then—

Something jabbed him in the middle of the back. With a startled yelp, he leaped six feet, spun around and stood gaping at an apparition looming up six and a half feet high, a yard wide, bristling with black beard below piercing black eyes, the entire composition wrapped in a formerly white burnous from which one leathery hand projected, gripping a four-foot-long cutlass with a curve like a banana and an edge that caught the light like a well-stropped razor.

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WHAT A MAN BELIEVES

By ROBERT SHECKLEY Illustrator: HENRY C. PITZ

YOU must forgive me," Mr. Archer said, his lips peeled back in a grin. "I shouldn't be smiling—smirking." He laughed out loud, high-pitched. "But it'll take a moment. I just hadn't expected—even on my deathbed—"

"Of course," the man behind the desk said. He smiled encouragingly. In the tremendous room there was only Mr. Archer, the desk he stood before, and the man who sat behind it. The ceiling of the room was a soaring, limitless arch as far above Archer's head as the blue sky had seemed when he was alive. The walls were misty, far-away things. And in the center of it all, there he was —Edward Moran Archer.

"A very usual reaction, I assure you," the man behind the desk said, looking down at the lapels of his suit to give Archer time to straighten his face.

"We make allowances for it. Your present age of sophistication is wary of anthropomorphisms, such as this. People are no longer raised in the belief of a heaven and a hell; they view such

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things as convenient fictions for the preachers and writers. Naturally, when they die and find themselves catapulted into the one or the other, the reaction is hysteria. Some cry. Others laugh."

"I see," Mr. Archer said. He had himself under control now, but a grin was still tugging at the corners of his broad mouth. "Well, I haven't been a particularly good chap. Broke a number of the ten commandments, including the more serious ones. Where's your fire and brimstone?" He pursed his lips, because the grin was threatening to crack any moment. Imagine! After all, he was going to be burned in a good old-fashioned hell of the sort his grandfather had described in such loving detail. But he still couldn't take it seriously. The situation was so bizarre, so basically humorous.

"Do you *want* fire and brimstone?" the man behind the desk asked.

"Not particularly," Mr. Archer said. "Is there any choice?"

"Of course!" the man told him, looking very un-diabolical in his neat gray business suit, with his smoothly combed hair. "Free will is manifest in the universe—even here. You have many alternatives to choose among."

"Different punishments?" Archer asked. "A choice of the thumbscrews or the iron maiden? The rack or the hot irons?"

"All those come under a single category," the man behind the desk said. "Allow me to show you."

Instantly, Archer discovered himself to be a disembodied intellect. He was in a small, low-ceilinged room. The only light was provided by smoking torches, which threw jagged streaks of red and yellow across the stone walls.

Poesque, Archer thought, and complimented himself on his coolness.

In the center of the room was a tableau. A man, a single rag wrapped around his loins, was stretched across a great wheel, his body drawn tight as a taut bowstring. His tormenters, motionless, were on either side of him. One held a hot iron, a bare fraction of an inch from the flesh. Another was tightening an iron boot to his foot while still another had his hand on the lever that moved the wheel; and all were frozen in mid-action.

The faces of the tormenters were hooded and dark; the man's agonized face was turned to the ceiling, and all Archer could see was the white line of his jaw and corded neck. He strained his eyes to catch a movement, but for long seconds could make out none. Then he noticed that, imperceptibly, the rack was being drawn tighter; the boot was being

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screwed on the foot, the steaming iron coming closer, searing the flesh by degrees so gradual as to be imperceptible.

The scene vanished.

"Not laughing now?" the man behind the desk asked in a friendly tone.

Archer shook his head.

"We show that scene first. There's nothing like a little good old-fashioned torture to sober a man up. Of course, they say that no physical torment can compare to the psychological, and I believe it is true. Still, for those who can't stand the others, we *do* have the torture chambers."

"You said there were other choices?" Archer asked. He caught himself shuddering. Physical torture—it had always terrified him. Ever since he had been a little boy. Even the thought of being hurt—a splintered arm, a blasted leg . . . .

"Of course there are others," the man said. "And you may choose any one of them. Allow me to present the selection."

Archer's mind was immediately in space, moving in on the side of a mountain. He came in closer, and saw a dot on the white stone face. The dot resolved itself into a man.

Standing beside him in spirit, Archer watched him climb. He moved slowly, carefully, up the sheer face of the cliff. There was barely a handhold on the smooth rock, hardly a single roughness to give purchase. Like a giant ant, the man struggled on.

Looking up, Archer could see that the top of the mountain was wreathed in mist. There was mist below, covering the bottom. Between the two mists was sheer, bare rock, and the climbing man.

The man moved upward, and Archer saw that he *must* move up, or slip down. And once started, there would be nothing to break the descent.

Would he fall, Archer wondered, watching him cling to the rock, scrambling for a grip. Or would he win through to the top? Archer watched, and felt a surge of sympathy grow within him. "Beat them!" he shouted through silent lips. "Get there!"

And the scene vanished.

"A variation," the man behind the desk said. "On the theme of Sisyphus. But instead of a stone, the man pulls himself."

"What happens when he reaches the top?" Archer asked, feeling better already. The mountain was a far better alternative to the torture, he thought, leaning against the desk.

"To tell you the truth," the man said, "It has never been definitely established that the mountain *has* a top. Although I suppose it has."

"No top?" Archer breathed. He stood erect, suddenly. "You mean that the man will just climb

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—and climb—for all eternity?"

"I never said it had no top. I just mentioned that it has never been definitely established. As for climbing and climbing, he will climb, yes. Unless he wishes to let go, in which case he will fall. And eternity is one of your sophistications which I, personally, have no belief in. There is no proof of it."

The next scene was a boat on an ocean. The water was gray, and the waves were gray, with no whitecaps. In front of the little boat was a wall of gray mist; behind it and on all sides was gray water, stretching as far as the eye could see.

There was a man in the mastless little boat, sitting at the helm, staring into the mist. The boat moved gently, over the gray waves, into the mist which retreated in front of it.

"Pleasant, eh?" the man behind the desk asked, when the scene disappeared. "Romantic, isn't it? A ship at sea, the mysterious water."

"I suppose the ocean has no end?" Archer said wryly, feeling he had caught on to the place.

"I don't know," the man said. "The ocean undoubtedly has an end somewhere. But it is entirely possible that the boat is moving in gigantic circles."

"And he'll never find out," Archer said.

"He expects to," the man told him. "If he has faith, he thinks that just beyond the wall of mist may be the shore. A mile, a dozen miles, a hundred miles. Or only a few yards."

"Show me more," Archer said. "I'm catching on."

There was a small, well-lighted room with a closed door in one wall. A conveyor belt ran through an opening, across the room, and out another opening. A man stood in front of the belt, putting bolts in the mechanisms that rode past. His work wasn't difficult; every second a part would come by, he would slip a bolt into it, and wait for the next.

"The influence of the machine age," the man said. "It suits some."

"When the last bolt is in, he's finished?"

"Right."

"But," Archer said, "The conveyor belt is endless. And someone—some other victim, perhaps, has the job of taking out the bolts; at a different part of the belt." Archer permitted himself a sour smile. He had the place figured out, exactly as he had figured out every place he had ever been in his life; every place except the hospital, that is, where no amount of money would give him a new heart.

"Why doesn't he go through that door?" Archer asked. "Is it locked?"

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"No, there are no locked doors here. But he must not leave his work. The door is there when he is finished."

"The old anticipation game," Archer said. "Keep them hoping, keep them thinking it's going to be all right in the end. Clever devils!"

"It may well be," the man behind the desk said. He looked at the lapels of his suit until Archer had stopped smiling. "But I, personally, don't know."

There were other things; ingenious things, amazing things, even terrifying things. Archer saw the choice of the ancients: a clearing in a forest where a man could stand, sword in hand. Then, through the trees, a gigantic wolf would bound forth. With one sweep—evidently he was in practice—the man would cut down the wolf. Mortally wounded, the animal would drag itself away. The man would stand, sword poised, listening. Some barely perceptible sound—the rustle of a twig, the pounding of a heart—would give the warning, and he would turn at the instant another wolf leaped through the trees from a different point. And cut him down, and wait for another.

"It would be amusing," Archer said, "If it were the same wolf, over and over again."

"But it may not be," the man reminded him. "There may well be a number of foes to kill—a hundred, a thousand, a million. He may someday reach the end of them, and be able to continue through the forest to his destiny."

"Or he may not," Archer said sardonically. "Especially if it *is* the same wolf. As you and I know."

The man shrugged his shoulders. "That is not my concern. Faith, or the lack of it, is not for me. You have seen—choose!"

Psychological torture, Archer mused. Wasn't it always that way? Wasn't hell just another way of keeping the other fellow anticipating, hoping, waiting? So that was how it was. Well then.

But what idiot, he wondered, would choose the torture chamber? A masochist, perhaps? A man like himself, who saw through the eternity of anticipation? Oh, no!

The mountain? Strenuous, to say the least. And so stupid, as was the conveyor belt. The swordsman's lot was a little better, but who wanted to spend eternity stabbing wolves? With the possibility that one might be a trifle careless, and get bitten in the process.

The others were no better.

"I believe the boat is the best thing," Archer said. "So if you haven't any—"

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Instantly he was in a small boat, sailing over a gray sea, into a mist.

Damn! There were some more questions he wanted to ask. Well, no matter; he might as well settle down to spend eternity comfortably.

After a while he looked over the boat. There was nothing to see. No ropes, no rudder, no provisions. Just a wooden hull and himself. There was enough room to lie down, though, and he did so. Perhaps he could sleep.

With a gray, expressionless sky over him, the gray sea under him, and the gray boat on all sides, Archer slept.

He awoke, to find the same sea and sky, the same boat and mist.

He wasn't hungry or thirsty. Reaching down with his hand, he felt the water. It was real water. He tasted it. Salt. An ocean of tears? He settled down to wait.

Time passed, and he reviewed his situation. Anticipation was the key to the torture, he was sure. For all eternity he was supposed to peer into the mist, waiting, expecting the shore to come any minute, dark against the gray water. But he resolved not to think of it. It was absurd to hold hopes in this place.

Perhaps he should have chosen something else, he thought, after a time. There was no denying that the boat ride was monotonous. At least, lopping off

heads or putting in bolts he would have something to do.

Archer reviewed his life. He went over it in minute detail, reliving every moment, stretching it out. Grimly he reviewed the steps that had brought him here, the many crossroads in his life. He thought about everything, the good, the bad and the indifferent.

In a way, he was glad that many decisions had brought him to this place. It gave him much to think about.

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Time passed, unnoticed on the sea, the advancing boat, the retreating mist.

Thought ran on.

Time passed, and Archer lay or sat or stood in the boat, feeling as human as ever, except that he was never hungry or thirsty. But bored!

So much time passed that it seemed as though eternity must be starting over again. Archer had exhausted every thought, every combination and permutation of thought that he was capable of. And nothing changed in the gray boat, or on the gray sea, or in the gray mist.

Time passed.

Slowly . . . .

TIME PASSED!

"This is too much," Archer said out loud again. He had been talking aloud for some time.

"I can't stand this," he repeated. For the ten millionth time he speculated on what was in the water. What dangers? What horrors?

Time passed.

"But I think I can go overboard." After thinking about it for the billionth time, Archer lowered himself over the side of the boat into the gray sea. He had long considered how it would feel, the water lapping around him, the thoughts it would bring, and the thoughts *they* would bring.

For a moment it was wonderful. He paddled, keeping himself up in the water, watching the boat continue without him. Then something happened.

Ahead, the mists parted. The boat cleaved through them, and there was the shore, long and dark on the horizon. Archer could make out trees, a beach. The boat sped on, and grounded itself. Archer saw the shapes of other boats, and thought he glimpsed people.

"There was an end!" he gasped. "The boat wasn't going in circles!" And the climber—Archer knew that he had reached the top of his mountain, if he had the courage to go on long enough. And the worker had placed his last bolt, and the swordsman killed his last wolf.

All, a test of faith! Faith, in hell!

He struck out for the shore, but the water was like thick jelly, weighing down his arms and legs, keeping his head below the surface. He took one last, despairing look at the shore, and began to sink.

Of course he couldn't drown. Not once dead. All he could do was sink, and sink, and sink. To where? To the bottom.

And what would be waiting for him on the bottom? Why, for those without faith or hope—

The torture chamber, of course.

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THREE WISHES

By POUL ANDERSON

Illustrator: DICK FRANCIS

Some writers achieve lasting fame with a single story. Others never win any fame at all—they simply fade into that Limbo where forgotten writers go. But a few, though not famous overnight, have a more satisfying fate—because over the years they keep developing and refining their talent until one day they wake up dominant figures in their field. That's where Poul Anderson is now. Astonishingly versatile, he repeatedly shows that he can go from such weighty novels as The High Crusade *to polished miniatures like "Three Wishes"—in which kindly Papa Himmelschoen has everything going for him, until a figurine name Iulia begins granting wishes that soon put an end to all that.*

PAPA HIMMELSCHOEN got the little statue quite by accident. He had fixed a pair of pants for Mrs. Polanyi's youngest son, and before she could pay him, her husband lost his job. When she told Papa about it and asked how she could make it up to him, he smiled and spread his hands and told her to forget the bill.

"Ach, so liddle a ting it iss," he said. "Let it be a fafor from vun neighbor to anudder."

"But we are not your neighbors," said Mrs. Polanyi. She was tall and straight and dark, and spoke English better than most people thereabouts, in spite of being from Hungary or some such outlandish place. "We live two blocks down."

"Vell, ve are all neighbors on de goot green eart," said Papa Himmelschoen. There was not a blade of grass for miles, only sidewalks and tenements, and the

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hot air smelt of gasoline and garlic. But he liked to talk that way. "Forget it, pleasse."

"No," said Mrs. Polanyi. "In spite of all they say about the Romany folk, we do pay our debts, for good or ill. And since we may have to move away soon looking for work, I will pay you the only way I can." So she brought him the statue. Soon afterward her family did go, and Papa never heard of them again.

The statue was sure a pretty little thing, and it must have been very old. It was bronze, and green with many hundred years. It. No—*she*. You could not be thinking of that tiny laughing girl with the wings on her shoulders as anything but she. Papa set her up on his bench and got much pleasure from looking at her now and then while he worked. But then, Papa got pleasure from everything. Maybe he was the only really happy man in the world.

But he had much to be happy about. It isn't everyone who can come over as a scared hungry little kid and end up as the best custom tailor in town. Maybe everybody didn't know Himmelschoen was the best, but enough people knew it to keep him busy at the work he liked. And his Martha was a fine woman—the best of wives—always cheerful like himself and a cook for angels. Their kids were all doing well too. Herman had come back from the war with lots of medals and had started a booming used-car business, and Esther was married to a good boy and had given them a fat little rascal of a grandson, and Morris was at the University doing something big in physics and all the time getting his name in the papers. Yes, life had been good to Papa Himmelschoen.

So it happened one morning that he came down into the shop from the upstairs flat where he and Martha lived, full of her fine breakfast and glad with all the world. "Goot morning, goot morning, goot morning!" he cried to the shears and the sewing machine and the bolts of cloth. "A happy goot morning to all!" And as a ray of sunshine came dustily in and touched his little bronze girl: "Und goot morning to you too!" And he picked her up and kissed her, so good was he feeling.

"Yipe!" cried Papa Himmelschoen, and let her go. For all of a sudden there was a warm wiggling thing in his hand, like a puppy dog maybe. And when his fingers opened, the little girl flew out and perched on the counter. Only she wasn't bronze any more, she was live flesh and blood, with little sparkles of light dusted over her wings. A real live fairy!

She yawned and stretched her-

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self, and her voice was like little fiddles and bells. "Oh my, I've slept a long time!"

"Who iss you?" asked Papa, getting up nerve.

"Oh, I am Iulia," she answered, curtsying very prettily. "Morgan le Fay was angered with me and condemned me to sleep in the form of a bronze statue until the Happy Prince kissed me and brought me back to life." She looked him up and down and her face got puzzled. "But are you a prince?"

"No, no, liddle lady, I am chust old Himmelschoen," he said, keeping his eyes away and not calling Martha down to look at this. Because a statue without clothes on is one thing, but a live girl in the same is another, and he was an old married man.

"Pleasse," he said, taking out his handkerchief, "do you mind wrapping dis around your . . . uh . . . around you?"

"Why in Faerie should I do that?" asked Iulia.

"Vell—dey dress different now," said Papa Himmelschoen.

"As you wish, my deliverer," said she, and tucked the handkerchief around her middle.

"No, no, a liddle higher up too, if you pleasse," begged Papa. "Up around de—de lungs too."

"I can't," said Iulia, after trying. "My wings get in the way." So she sat down, dangling her feet over the edge of the counter, and looked at him instead. "I never thought the Happy Prince would be thus," she murmured. "Have you no royal blood at all?"

"I am chust a common old man," said Papa. "But I am happy, efen if you are not dressing qvite de vay I like ladies in my shop should dress."

"But you must be a prince!" cried Iulia. "Just a moment, I will look into your time line if you don't mind—a few centuries back—"

"You vill *not!*" said Papa firmly. "Undecent enough you are already!"

But Iulia had already done it. She nodded and smiled. "Quite all right," she said. "I notice descent from several Electors of Brandenburg by their mistresses, from Frederick Barbarossa by a girl he met at an inn, from Charlemagne by fifteen different—"

"Shtop! Shtop!" cried Papa, as close to anger as he ever got. "First my shop you run around like it was a bating beach only more so, den you defame my ancestors, und vot now?"

"Now I must get back to Faerie," said Iulia. "It's been such a long time!" She paused as she was standing up, with her wings shimmering like a small rainbow. "Oh! I almost forgot! My deliverer gets three wishes."

"Tree vishes?" asked Papa. Just like a fairy story yet!

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"That's right. The rules, you know."

"No, I do not know."

"Now you do. What are your wishes?"

"Vy . . . vy . . . ." Papa scratched his bald head. "Vy, I don't know, liddle lady. I got all a man needs. Now, you chust run along und forget it, no?"

"But I have to give you three wishes!" cried Iulia. "It's in the rules. Oberon will be furious if I don't. He'll put me on toad-stool patrol for a hundred years."

"Oh, vell, in dot case," said Papa. "Let me see now. De vorld iss not so happy like it should be for many poor peoples, so—"

"Can't grant wishes to or for anyone but you yourself," said Iulia quickly. "The rules don't allow it. Anyway, I have only so much strength, you know."

"But I don't need nutting for mineself!" said Papa. "I got goot vork, my vife is de best cook in de vorld, my kids is all grown up und doing vell, ve all haff healt und enough money. Vot more are ve vanting? You are tinking I am John D. Rockenheimer, maybe?"

"You have to wish!" wailed Iulia. She was close to tears.

"But I don't vant to vish!" cried Papa.

"Please," begged Iulia. "For my sake. Just to help me, won't you take a pot of gold?"

"No," said Papa. "Vit gold I am not vanting nutting to do. It iss unlawful to haff gold anyvay. Und too much money makes trouble by de income tax. I should sit up all night filling out ten miles of forms?"

"Maybe you want to be young and strong and handsome again?" purred Iulia.

"Ach, no!" cried Papa in horror. "I am young again, vot vould my wife say? Vot are my customers saying, who iss dis young schlemiel moving in und taking Himmelschoen's shop, vill ve do business vit him? No! Und my old chess-playing friends, ven I come up und vant a game dey vill laugh and say I am crazy in de head, a baby like me should be vanting to play vit experts. No, I like my own age, tank you chust de same."

"Travel!" suggested Iulia. "Adventure! The glamor of the mysterious Orient!"

"No, tank you," said Papa firmly. "I am so seasick coming ofer I am not vanting to set foot on so much as a rowboat in all my days. Efery summer Martha und I take two veeks up by Danbury, vere ve haff friends und a comfortable place to stay. I should sleep on de ground yet vit lions und tigers und tom-toms prowling around? Nefer!"

"But I have to give you three wishes!" sobbed Iulia.

She looked so pretty and unhappy, dabbing at her eyes with a corner of Papa's handkerchief,

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that he was glad when he found the answer. "Nefer you mind, liddle lady, I vill haff my vishes," he said grandly, with a broad smile.

"You will?" Right away Iulia was sparkling with happiness and throwing off showers of rainbows from her wings. "Oh, thank you, my Prince! What is your first wish?"

"Vell," said Papa proudly, for it was a fine plan he had gotten, "I vish I had tree tings to vish for."

"Your wish is granted," said Iulia, too excited to stop and think.

All at once, Papa did remember three things he wanted. It had never bothered him before, but suddenly he knew that his shiny head was sort of funny and he would like a little more hair on it. And he hadn't thought of Rodtstein's Beer for years, since you couldn't get it any more, but now he remembered that it was the best beer in the world. And yes, there was that bragging old fool Hyman down at the club who always beat him at chess and talked about it, he would like to put Hyman in his place.

Good! Fine! What more than those three wishes did a man need?

"I am first vanting a goot head of hair," said Papa.

Iulia giggled and waved her hand. All at once his scalp felt funny. He went over to the mirror and, horror, three feet long and red as fire the hair was coming out on top.

"Not so!" he bellowed. "Vite, und like a man, not a dustmop!"

Iulia magicked him his hair the way he wanted it. "Chust a little closer around der edges," he said, "und take a liddle off der top. Ah, dere it iss."

"And now what is your desire?" asked Iulia.

"Now, a big barrel vit Rodtstein's Beer, vot dey don't make any more but iss de best beer in de vorld. Lager, pleasse."

So a huge keg appeared out of nowhere, and when he tapped it it was the beer of his dreams. Maybe Martha wouldn't like it, him having this barrel and right in the shop, but a man needs one weakness anyway.

"Ach, wunderbar!" said Papa Himmelschoen. "Und now—"

"That makes three wishes, I think," said Iulia, and her eyes got wide as she saw what had happened. But it was too late, and fairies do not go feeling sorry when they have all the gossip of many hundred years to catch up on.

"Vot?" cried Papa. "Vy, I haff only vished for—"

"First you wished for three things to wish for—remember? Then the hair and the beer makes three." Iulia stretched herself,

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trembling like a bird with eagerness. "Now, goodbye, Happy Prince, and fortune walk with you all your days."

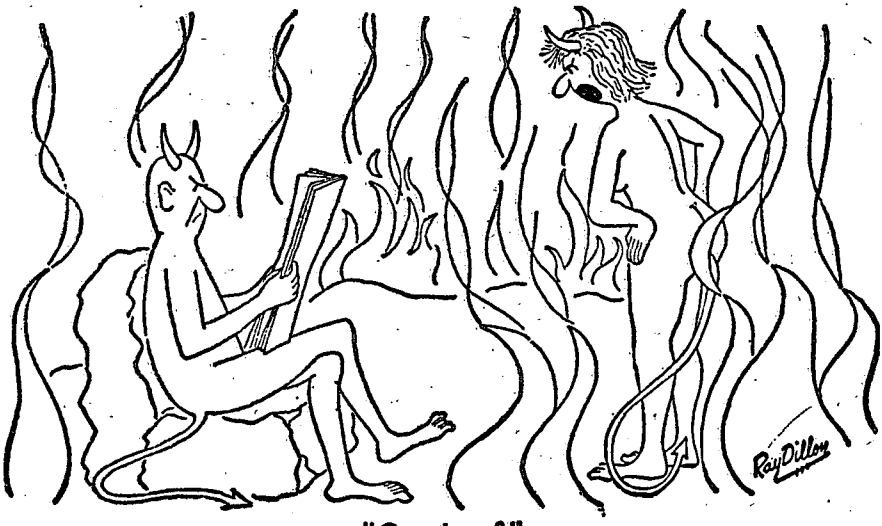
"But you can't leafe me like dis!" wailed Papa. "Before, I am so happy nutting iss wrong. Now I am vishing for vun ting only you can giff me. It ain't fair! I made de vishes only to help you!"

"I'd like to give you one more wish, really I would," said Iulia. "But I'm only allowed three." She pouted with thinking. "I have only one suggestion. Morgan le Fay always was short-tempered and must have turned many other fairies into bronze statues. If you can find another . . . ." She laughed and flew up and kissed him on his forehead. "Now, goodbye, my Prince!"

And she was gone.

Papa groaned and tapped a glass of Rodstein's Beer.

So if you see a little old man haunting pawnshops, especially those in Hungarian neighborhoods, and looking wistfully at all the dusty statuettes in the place—that is Papa Himmelschoen, searching for the only way in the world to checkmate that bragger Hyman.



"Go where?"

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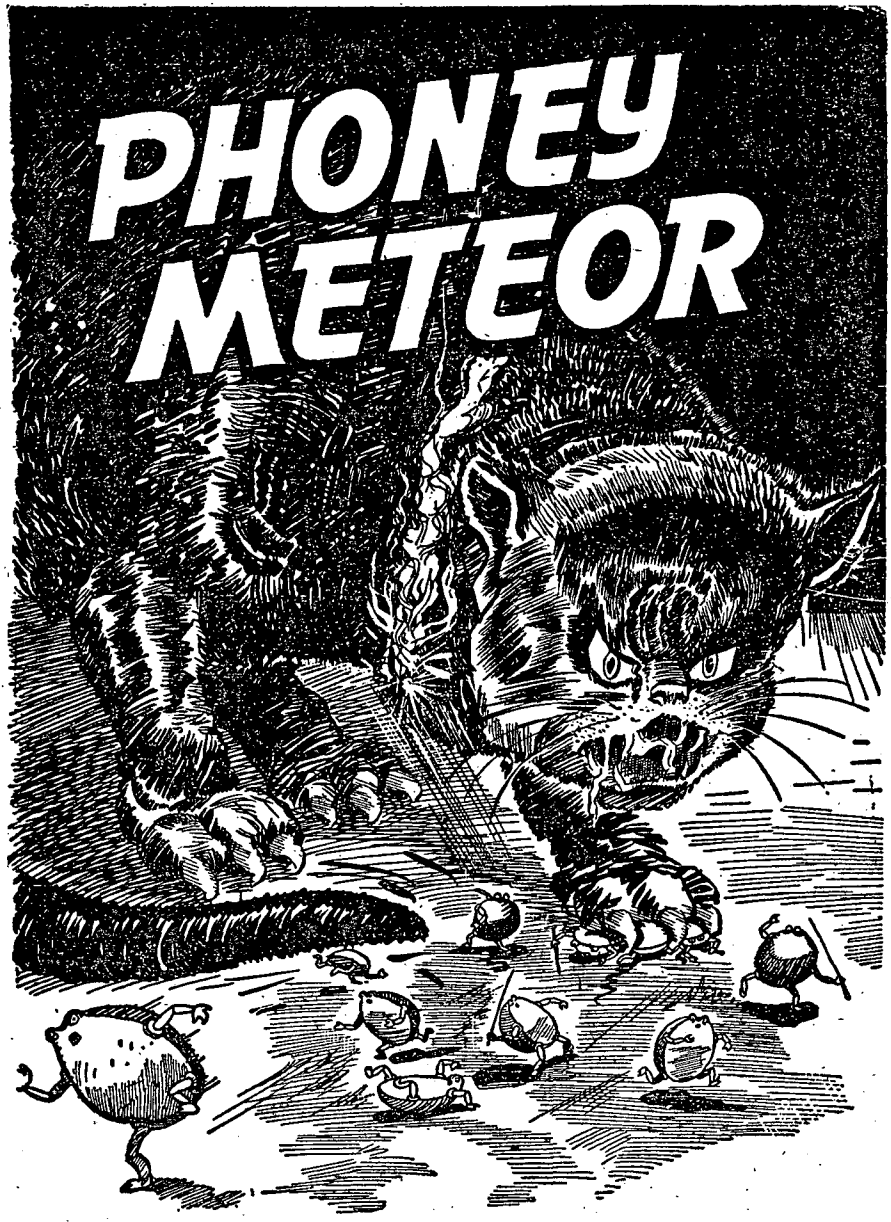

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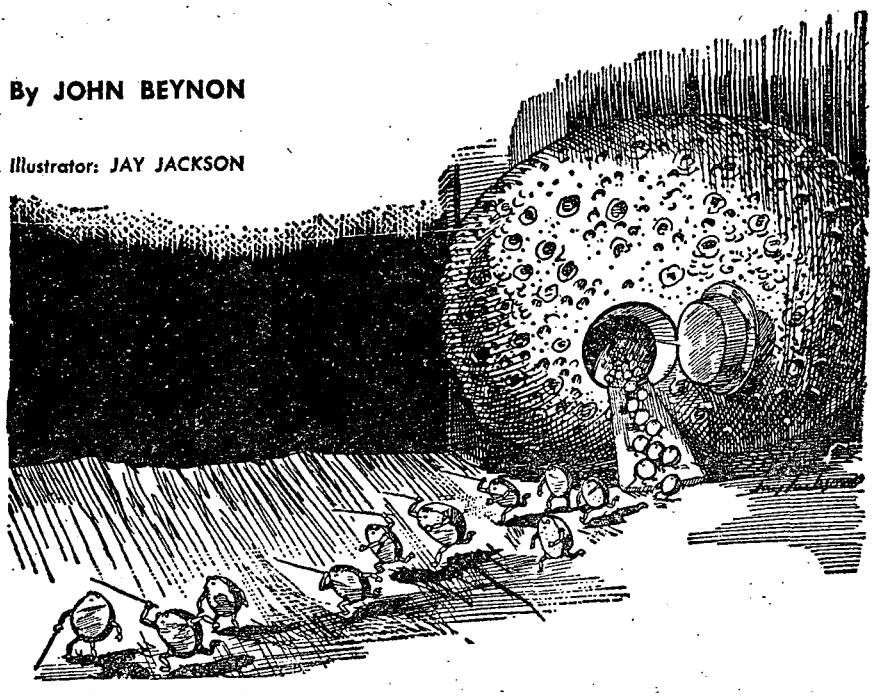
By JOHN BEYNON

Illustrator: JAY JACKSON



Sometimes an author's pen name becomes so famous it tends to eclipse his real name. That's what happened to Will F. Jenkins (now better known as Murray Leinster), and that's what seems to be happening to John Beynon Harris, now internationally famous as John Wyndham, author of such classics as Re-Birth *and* The Day of the Triffids. *Before adopting the Wyndham pseudonym, however, John Beynon Harris (writing as John Beynon) did a good number of excellent early stories, among them "Phoney Meteor"—in which Earth is not exactly invaded; let's say it's colonized—but by highly intelligent creatures who—astonishingly—can't even tell that mankind exists!*

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YOURS, Sally. Double score wanted for the honor of the Post," said Graham.

Sally took the darts, and concentrated. The first went high; the second low. She poised the last carefully.

Everyone regarded the board with breathless attention. The other side was too good to be given any unnecessary chances. Prestige hung in the balance for the Warsbury A.R.P. Post—also a case of beer, and the Post was justly proud of the fact that it had not had to pay for a case of beer for some weeks past.

Sally Fontain drew back her arm, started to throw . . . .

At that exact moment the floor shook under her feet. Somewhere outside there was a thunderous crash; the glass in the sandbagged windows jiggled and rattled. Sally's dart flew wide, glanced off a tin hat and imbedded itself in the toe of a gumboot.

For a moment no one moved or spoke, then one of the visiting team reached for his cigarette case. "Do you suppose," he inquired, carefully opening it; "do you suppose that's God or Hitler?"

Nobody answered. All the other seven stood waiting, tensely expectant of a second crash. It failed to come; an unusually deep silence seemed to have settled over everything.

Sally moved first. She negotiated the screen of blankets, opened the door and put her head into the outer darkness. There was no sound but a soft swish of the wind in the bare branches.

"If it was thunder, it ought to come again," the visiting spokesman was maintaining as she came back, "but if it was Hitler it makes it a natural hazard and our turn."

"I can't see or hear anything," she said. "Do you think we ought to have a look around?"

Graham Toffts scratched his head.

"We ought to have had the warning," he pointed out aggrievedly. "If it's a raid, you're supposed to stay here till we get the all clear. If it isn't, it's none of our business and . . . ."

The sudden buzz of the telephone cut him short. He leaped to the desk and picked up the receiver.

"This is Church-Warsbury 69," he said.

He listened.

"The message is white," he dutifully repeated.

Putting the telephone down he reached for the log book of the Post and began to enter the time of the call. Then with his pencil on the paper he suddenly looked up.

"Did I say the message was white?" he inquired, surprisedly.

"You did," they assured him.

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"That's funny. The last entry here is for Tuesday."

He considered the telephone thoughtfully for a moment. Then he picked it up again and gave a number.

"Did you say," he asked, "that the message was white?"

"I did," a voice assured him.

"And that means 'cancel all previous messages'?"

"Sure."

"Well, what was the previous message?"

"I don't know, old boy. We never had one."

"Then what the devil . . . ?"

"Just obeying instructions, old man. Now do you mind getting off the . . . ."

"Wait a minute," said Graham. "There's been a big noise here, do you . . . ?"

"I thought he was in London."

"No, I mean something went bang . . . ."

"Probably termites undermining your Post. Now get off the line there's a good chap, I've got to ring the other Posts." The instrument died.

"Idiot," murmured Graham, as he hung up.

"Pretty well establishes that it wasn't Hitler," remarked the visitor, "so Sally had better throw that one again."

AN hour later their turn of duty ended. The relieving wardens were greeted by the information that the Post was another case of beer to the good and by inquiries as to what had been responsible for its near loss. The newcomers, however, had little to tell. Only that the village had been roused by the crash, but finding that no air-raid warning was sounded, had gradually settled down and returned to bed.

The visiting dart players had taken themselves off half-an-hour before, and now their two co-wardens slipped away. Graham waited while Sally tucked her trousers into her boots and watched her pull the light blue lined hood over her fair hair. She smiled at him through the mirror. They wished a quiet night to their successors, and went out into the darkness.

The air was chilly. Sally took deep breaths of it, refreshing herself and driving the warm mugginess and smoke of the Post out of her lungs. The new moon had set, but the sky was clear with enough light to bring first branches, then hedges, then the road itself slowly into visibility. She looked up into the star stippled heavens and drew another satisfying breath. Her fur gloved hand slipped under Graham's arm.

"I love it," she said. "I want it."

"Darling, how comprehensive. Crying for the sky."

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"It's more than sky now," she said. "Before all this beastliness started, it was just the sky. But now it's a piece of reality, I think. I'd like to spread my arms and float into it, swim in it, away from all this. It's still real, but we are in a nightmare."

There came the faint, increasing drone of an airplane. Searchlight beams shot out sweeping this way and that, fantastic because they looked like solid wands yet they neither broke nor bent as they whipped across the sky. One of them and then another found the machine, a tiny bit of silver paper high, high up, then they lost it. They flicked about a little, seemed to lose interest, and shut themselves off one by one. The plane buzzed on its way.

"That's not real, you know," said Sally. "It's a lunatic's dream."

"Shakespeare more or less forestalled you: 'Life is a tale told by an idiot'," said Graham.

She nodded. "Of course. I sometimes wonder that literature survived Shakespeare, considering that he forestalled pretty well everybody in all they want to say.

"Do you think that out there," she went on, waving a furry hand to include the whole sidling galaxy, "there are tales told by sane men? It'd be a relief to know it, somehow, even if one could never get there."

"May be, but they'll have their own problems. Their ancestors will have made their beds, and now they and their children must lie on them."

"You're very quotational tonight, aren't you?"

They reached a fork in the road. Sally paused.

"Well, good-night, Graham."

He pressed her arm firmly under his own.

"Not at all. I'm going to see you safely home."

"It's late. I can tackle the perils of Warsbury myself."

"I know. Tough girl and all that. It was merely my way of indicating that I would like to continue the pleasure of your society. Come along."

"I don't think," she said, "I'm quite as tough as I hoped. I jumped like hell at that bang tonight—and nearly lost the beer as a result."

"Hang it. We all jumped like hell. Who wouldn't? I wonder what it was? If there'd been anything near here to blow up, I'd say it had, but there isn't. Not that I know of. Have you heard of a dump of any kind?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing nearer than the anti-air-craft people at Haxett—and that bang can't have been six miles away. A boiler, perhaps?"

"No domestic boiler could make a row like that. I don't.... Hullo, what do you suppose is going on over there?"

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He pointed to a bright light flashing erratically on the further side of a clump of trees.

"Two thicknesses of tissue paper over the bulb," he observed. "Not that anyone much seems to pay any attention to the rule, but there are limits."

THEY passed the trees and had a clearer view. Someone was playing a powerful beam of undimmed brilliance back and forth across the grass.

"That's one of our fields," said Sally. "What on earth . . . ?"

"I'll go over. You stay here."

"Rubbish," she retorted.

They climbed the fence together. The holder of the lamp was too intent on his mysterious occupation to notice their approach until Graham spoke. At the sound of his voice the lamp jogged suddenly and switched in their direction, dazzling them.

"Damn it. You made me jump," said an aggrieved voice.

"Daddy," said the girl, "What on earth do you think you're doing?"

"I'm looking for something."

"At this time of night? And you, a warden's father, breaking the lighting regulations. I'm ashamed of you. What have you lost?"

The lamp was lowered so that it played on the ground as they approached.

"Well, I've not exactly lost anything," its holder admitted. "But something fell. You may have heard it—quite a loud noise about an hour and a half ago."

"Certainly we heard it. We thought it was an explosion."

"Oh no. Something definitely fell. I'd just taken the dog out. There was a flash— a dim sort of flash in this direction, and then the noise."

"A plane crashing?"

"No, I don't think so. It was a single bang. An airplane wouldn't have made nearly so much noise unless it was carrying bombs—and if it had been bombs I should have seen them explode. No, it was something else, I'm sure, but I haven't been able to find anything. I was just thinking of giving up when you came."

"I should. It's pretty late," Graham advised.

"Besides," added Sally, "you may attract some warden who isn't related to you. And you've no coat! Come along in and have a warm drink at once."

Mr. Fontain switched off his lantern and stepped toward them resignedly. "All right," he agreed meekly. He turned to Graham. "Are you thinking of marrying this young woman?" he inquired.

"I—er—well—um—that is to say—" began Graham, with some embarrassment.

"Don't," advised her father. "Too bossy, you know. Much too bossy."

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GOOD morning," said a voice, thin, distorted but still unmistakably Sally's over the telephone. "Your line's been occupied a long time."

"That, my dear, was the Chief Warden. I may as well tell you right off that he wants to know not only who let off the bang last night and scared half the countryside, but also who was fooling about with what appeared to be a private searchlight. I knew nothing of either. Truth in the first case; sentimental weakness in the second."

"Oh, Graham. You lied to save my family name?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Well, listen, I can make you some return. We've found the thing that made the bang—at least, that is we've found where it banged."

"Oh?"

"Yes, in a little spinney just beyond where Daddy was searching."

"What is it?"

"Oh, we've not got it yet. It broke a lot of trees and buried itself in a hole. Daddy's getting some men to dig. He thinks it was probably a meteorite."

"I'd better tell the Chief Warden or the Police and get them to send someone along."

"Why?"

"Well, I mean, suppose it's not a meteorite. Might be Hitler's secret weapon."

"Hitler's secret, my aunt," said Sally, briefly.

"Anyway, I'll pass it on and then come round. See you in half-an-hour," Graham told her, and hung up.

* * *

Extract from the Journal of Onns

AS AN INTRODUCTION to the notes which I intend to keep I can scarcely do better than to give the gist of the talk given to us on the day before we left Forta[1] by Excellency Cottafts. In contrast to our public farewell, this meeting was deliberately made as informal as a meeting of several thousands can be with the object of making it clear that, though there were leaders for convenience, there was no least amongst us.

Excellency Cottafts made that clear almost in his opening words.

"There is not one of you men and women[2] who is not a volunteer," he said. And as he spoke he looked slowly round his huge audience. His voice was amplified, but its tone remained natural; his manner was that of one

[1] Onns gives no clues to Forta's position. Opinions are still divided as to whether it is a planet, a moon or an asteroid.—Ed.

[2] The terms "men" and "women" are used not biologically, but in the sense of the dominant species referring to its own members. —Ed.

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talking to us, not one of a speech-maker.

"You have volunteered," he repeated. "In every one of you, since you are individuals, the proportions of emotions which led you to do so are different in detail, but, however personal or altruistic your impulses may be, there is a common denominator in all of us: it is the determination that—the race shall go on.

"Tomorrow the Globes go out.

"Tomorrow the consciousness of Forta puts its supreme strain on Nature.

"Civilization from its beginning is the ability to coordinate and direct natural forces—and once that direction has been started it must be maintained unless the end is to be terrible indeed. There have been other dominant species on Forta; they did not direct nature: they lived, increased, dwindled and died as conditions changed. We have met conditions as they changed—in a world vastly different from that our remote ancestors knew; we not only survive, we flourish.

"We flourish, moreover, in such numbers as undirected Nature could never have maintained. In the past we have surmounted problem after problem; now we find ourselves faced with one which seems to us greater than all the rest. Our world is senile; we are not. Ours are young spirits in a failing body.

"Or let me put it another way. This is our house, our home. We were born here. For centuries we have adapted it, kept it going, substituted, patched it until now there is little more with which to patch it. It is beginning, more than beginning, to deteriorate. Now, while we are healthy and strong, now is the time for us to find a new house.

"You understand that we must delay no longer or you would not be here. There will be our great grandchildren and their great grandchildren on Forta, but life will be harder, more time will be spent in the effort of keeping alive. That is why we must go now while we have strength and wealth to spare."

HE paused, looking slowly round the hall again.

"And after the Globes have gone, what then?

"For us on Forta a slow decline? I trust so. Terrible things have been predicted, I know. Anguished bloody struggles for survival, relapse into savagery. That may be, but I think not. I prefer to believe that we can teach our race to grow old gracefully, naturally and to die at last gently as an old, old man dies.

"But for you, what? That is a thing that no man can tell, and at which guesses are merely vain. You go in the Globes to the four corners of the heavens. All our

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arts and skill will set you on your courses. We can do no more after that than pray that you, our seed, will find the fruitful soil."

Again he paused. This time so long that he seemed to have forgotten us. At last he went on.

"Your charge you know or you would not have offered yourselves. Nevertheless, it is one which you will not be able to learn too well, nor teach too often. In the hands of each and every one of you lies a civilization. Every man and woman is both the receptacle and the potential fountain of all that Forta has ever been. You hold the history, the culture, the civilization of a planet. Use it. Use it well. Give it where it will help. Learn more and improve it if you can. Do not try to preserve it intact—to be real a culture must live and grow. In you we see the future of the race; but do not cling to the past or there will be no future.

"But do not forget the past; heed its warnings. There have been triumphs and failures, experiments that succeeded, ideals that turned out to be false. There have been good intentions with bitter, bloody aftermaths, mistakes which seemed about to wreck us. But we have won through, and it seems to me as it must seem to you that we hold a trust, not only for our race, but for all conscious life wherever it may be.

"Go forth, then, go forth in wisdom, kindliness, peace and truth.

"Our prayers go out into the mysteries of space with you—our children."

I HAVE looked again at our new home through the telescope. We are, I think, lucky. It is a planet which is neither too young nor too old. Conditions were good with little cloud. It shone like a blue pearl, and I was able to see more of it than ever before. Much of it was covered with water—more than two-thirds of it, they tell me, is under water. It will be good to be in a place where irrigation and water supply cannot be one of the main problems of life. Nevertheless, one hopes that we are fortunate enough to make our landing on dry ground, if we have the ill luck to land in one of the oceans it will make our task much more complicated in the beginning.

I looked, too, at the places to which some of the other globes are bound, some small, some large, some new and clouded so that their surfaces remain a mystery, at least one as old, it would appear, as our own poor Forta—though the astronomers tell me that it really has the ability to support life for several million years. All the same I am glad we are going to our blue, shining world; it seems to beck-

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on, and I am filled with a hope which does much to diminish my fears of the journey.

Not that my fears trouble me so much now as they did at first. I have managed in this last year to teach myself some fatalism about that. I shall go into the Globe, I tell myself; the anaesthetic gas will lull me to sleep even while I am unaware of it. When I wake it will be on our shimmering new world. If I do not wake, something will have gone wrong, but I shall never know it.

That's how it is—so simple. It is only in the night that my fears come back, and I wake up shivering at something I cannot remember: would it be, perhaps, the fear of fear?

I went down this evening to look at the Globes, to see them objectively for the last time. Tomorrow all will be bustle and preparation; there will be no time for reflection—that will be as well.

What a staggering, amazing, one would almost say impossible, work they are. The making of them has entailed labor beyond my comprehension. Over 700* feet in diameter they look more likely to crush the ground and to sink into Forta than to fly off into space. What mighty masses of metal. Tomorrow we must pass through a corridor in solid metal 144 feet long before we reach the interior space. Twenty of these metal mountains we have built with toil, sacrifice and hope. Twenty of them.

And some will be lost . . . .

Oh, God, let those of us who survive never forget. Let us be worthy of this supreme effort.

It may be that these are the last words that I shall ever write, but if I live, it will be in a new world and under a strange sky that I continue. For me Forta ends tomorrow. . . .

* * *

"YOU shouldn't have touched it," said the Chief Air Raid Warden severely. "It should have been left where it was until the proper authorities have inspected it."

There was a touch of the resuscitated war-horse about the Chief Warden. For a long time his words had had no more weight, save in his own home, than the next man's. Now he was able to give orders again and though obedience was scarcely up to Army standards, people did have at least to listen. He was feeling better and busier and more himself these last few months than he'd felt for years.

"And who," inquired Mr. Fon-

* Measurements are expressed in *relative* terms. That is to say that taking Onns, an average Fortan, as standing *in his own estimation* some 6 feet high, his Globe would appear to him to be 720 feet (240 yards) in diameter.—Ed.

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tain, patiently, "are the proper authorities for the inspection of meteorites?"

"That is beside the point. In war time any unusual happening should be reported to the police at once. How could you be sure it was a meteorite?"

"Because it looked like one. Anyway, how could the police be sure?"

"It's their job to make sure first that it isn't any new kind of enemy device, or—er—secret weapon."

"They, of course, knowing all about secret weapons? Do you represent the police?"

"No, I . . . ."

"Then may I ask . . . ."

Sally considered it time to break in hurriedly.

"Well, we shall know what to do next time we have a meteorite, sha'n't we? But suppose we all go and have a look at the thing. It's in the shed now, and looking quite harmless."

She led the party of four round to the yard, still talking to stave off a row between the Chief Warden and her father.

"It didn't go very deep and the men soon had it out. We expected it to be quite hot still, but it was barely warm so that they could handle it quite easily."

"You wouldn't say 'quite easily,' if you'd heard the language they used about the weight of it," her father put in.

"Here it is," Sally said, pushing open the door of a single story shed.

The others followed her in.

THE meteorite was not impressive to look at. It stood on the bare boards in the middle of the floor, a rugged, pitted, scarred, metallic-looking ball some thirty inches in diameter.

"Not much to make such a fuss about, is it?" said Mr. Fontain.

The Chief Warden did not care for the use of the word "fuss."

"It's the principle of the thing," he reproved. "Must do things in proper order in wartime. The Inspector and the Military Expert will be here to examine it shortly. Until they have done so, it shouldn't be touched again."

Graham did not take this literally. He laid his hand on the surface and found that the outside at any rate was almost cold now. "What's it made of?" he asked, curiously.

Mr. Faintain shrugged his shoulders.

"It's just a chunk of meteoric iron, I imagine. Nothing very special about it as far as one can see. If it is a secret weapon, it strikes me as a remarkably poor one," he added, pointedly.

"Never can tell what they'll be up to, what with magnetic mines and so on," said the Warden.

He looked over the object with

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a not very convincing air of one observing subtleties in it which had escaped lesser intelligences, but found himself without further comment to offer.

"If I were you, I should lock the door until the authorities arrive," he said, as the group moved off.

On the threshold he paused.

"What's that sizzling?" he inquired.

"Sizzling?" said Sally.

"Kind of hissing noise. Listen."

They stood still, the Warden with his head slightly on one side.

There was undeniably a faint, high note just within the range of audibility. It was elusive, uncertain and difficult to place.

By a common impulse their heads turned, and four pairs of eyes regarded the metal ball uneasily. Graham hesitated and then stepped forward. He leaned over it, his right ear turned toward it.

"Yes," he said, "it is."

His eyes closed and he swayed. Sally ran forward and caught him as he sagged. The others helped her to carry him outside. In the fresh air he revived at once.

"That's funny," he said. "What happened?"

"It's what's going to happen that's important," said the Chief Warden, with an ill-concealed air of triumph. "It came from that thing, did it?"

"Yes. It came from there all right."

The Chief Warden turned to Mr. Fontain.

"If you have an air raid shelter, sir, I should suggest that we adjourn there and take our gas masks. I don't trust mysterious 'meteorites' that sizzle."

HEY!" bawled a powerful voice.

"Is there anyone about here?"

The Chief Warden set down his whisky glass and made his way into the open. The others followed. The police Inspector and three officers were standing on the drive in front of the house.

"What's going on here?" the Inspector wanted to know.

"Sorry, Inspector. I've sent the servants away. Didn't hear you come," Mr. Fontain told him.

The Inspector performed introductions.

"These three gentlemen are the official experts," he explained. "Now if you'd be so good as to tell us where this object is . . .?"

"It's in the shed—sizzling," said the Chief Warden.

"Er—sizzling?" repeated the Inspector.

"Definitely sizzling."

"Oh," said the Inspector. "Oh, I see."

He gracefully left the matter in the hands of the experts.

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"We'll manage this if you show us where it is," said the senior officer. "You people had better get back to the shelter. And you, too, Inspector."

The policeman brightened. "Yes, sir."

Graham remained to show the way and to give what information he could. The men listened and nodded.

"Some new kind of gas container," one suggested. "You didn't smell anything?"

Graham assured him that there had been no smell other than the mustiness of the shed, and that if it had been gas it had left no aftereffects whatever.

In the yard the men put on their service respirators. The senior officer opened the door and walked in while another watched through the window. Through the open door Graham watched the man take two steps into the shed and then sink down in a huddle. The watcher at the window stepped back took a deep breath, dashed inside and dragged his superior out. In the open air the man revived even before the others had got the respirator off his face.

"Queer," he murmured, "very queer. No smell, no taste, nothing—and yet it goes right through the respirator before you know what's happened."

He considered.

"Afraid you people will have to clear out for a bit," he said to Graham. "Have to put a cordon round the place while we tackle it. Tell the others, will you?"

DAMN," said Sally when she heard the news. "They're not going to blow it up, are they?"

Graham was of the opinion that they would be more anxious to understand it than to destroy it if it could be helped.

"Oh, well that's not so bad," she said, relieved. "I thought they might damage the house."

"It might blow up of itself," suggested the Chief Warden, with a cheerless hopefulness.

* * *

Extract from the Journal of Onns.

IT IS BEWILDERING. Has it happened? Or have we failed? It is hard to believe either. Was it an hour, a day, a year, or a century ago that we entered the Globe? How can one tell? But, no, it was not an hour ago; I know that because my limbs are tired and my body aches.

They told us about that.

"You will feel nothing," they said, "nothing until after it is over. Then you will feel sore and physically weary because your bodies will have been subjected to great strains and there will be a sensation of weakness. That

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should pass quite soon, but we shall give you some capsules of concentrated food and stimulants to overcome the effects more quickly."

I have taken one capsule and I can feel the benefit of it pouring through me already. But it is still hard to believe.

We climbed the long passage into the Globe so short a time ago it seems. Inside we dispersed as we had been instructed. Each of us sought his or her elastic compartment. We crawled inside. Carefully one inflated the space between the inner and outer walls of the compartment. Gradually the lining distended. One was lifted on a mattress of air, the top bulged down, the sides closed in, pressing gently, until he was insulated from shocks in all directions. Then one waited.

Waited for what? I still cannot say. One moment, it seems, I lay there fresh and strong: the next, tired and aching.

It is over, or, rather, it is just beginning. The anaesthetic has seeped out, the air intake has been at work. That must mean that we have arrived. We are on that beautiful shining blue planet, and Forta will be only a speck in our heavens.

I feel different for the knowledge. All my life hitherto has been spent among a forlorn people on a world under the imminent sentence of death, where the greatest enemy was a lethal discouragement which must be checked lest it spread like a plague. Here there will be work, hope and life; a world to build and a future to build it for.

Great tasks await us. And what else? As I lie here I can hear the drills at work cutting a way out for us into a new life. What, I wonder, shall we find? A savage world where life may be hard at first among perils and with the struggle for survival. We must watch ourselves. It will perhaps be easier for us to keep faith among hardships than among plenty. But whatever this world is like faith *must* be kept.

In us there is a million years of history, a million years of knowledge—that must be preserved. If it is let go even for a generation or two, we shall have half-failed, for our children will have to fight their way up again through pain, blood and anguish. Generation upon generation of half-blind will be straining in agony to distinguish the right road from the wrong. That shall not be allowed to happen.

And yet we must adapt ourselves. Who can tell what forms of life there may be here? One could scarcely expect to find intelligent consiousness on a planet so young, and yet there may be the first stirrings of intelligence. We must watch for them, seek them out, cultivate them. They

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may be quite different from us, but we must help where we can. We must remember that it is their world. Born of their own planet, their rights are greater, perhaps, than ours—I do not know, it is debatable, but we have no right to frustrate them. We must teach and learn and co-operate until, perhaps, between us we may achieve a civilization greater than Forta's own.

* * *

"WHAT," said the officer in charge, "do you think you're doing with that?"

His junior lifted up the limp, furry body by the tail and held it dangling.

"It's a cat, sir."

"I can see that for myself."

"I thought you might want to inspect it, sir."

"Why should I want to inspect a dead cat?"

The other explained. He had a squad of men busy filling sandbags and piling them around the outer walls of the building for the purpose of localizing the effect of any explosion and directing its main force upward. He himself had risked going into the shed again. He had tied a rope round his waist so that he could be dragged out again if overcome and had kept low, crawling into the place on all fours. These precautions, however, had proved unnecessary. It seemed that the gas had dispersed and the sizzling or hissing had ceased. He was able to approach the ball closely without any ill effects. A short distance from it he became aware of a faint buzzing.

"Buzzing?" interrupted his superior. "What kind of buzzing?"

The other considered.

"Well, sir, the nearest thing I can suggest is a buzzsaw working slowly, a long way off."

"Can't say I've ever heard one, but I think I see what you mean. Well?"

Since it was clear that the thing, whatever it was, was still active, sandbagging operations had been continued. He had forbidden any of the men to go into the shed, but he himself had looked in from time to time during the next hour and a half and found no further traces of gas.

It was at the end of this time that the cat had prowled into the yard. He had induced it to go into the shed as an experiment. There had been no result, and he forgot it in directing operations. Half-an-hour later he had remembered it, and, looking in, saw it lying stretched full length near the mysterious ball. On fetching it out he had found it dead.

"Another kind of gas?" suggested the senior officers.

"No, sir. It's rather odd."

He laid the cat's body on the table and turned the head to

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show the underside of the jaw. A circle of the black fur was burned away, and in the center of the burn was a small hole.

"H'm," said the other. He touched the wound, and then smelled his fingers. "Burned hair all right, but no explosive fumes," he said.

"That's not all, sir."

The younger man turned the head over to reveal an exactly similar blemish on the crown. He took a thin straight wire from his pocket and probed it gently through the hole beneath the jaw. The wire emerged from the hole at the top of the head.

"Can you make anything of that?" he asked.

The other frowned. A weapon of minute bore at point-blank range might have made one of the wounds, but they appeared to be entrance and exit holes of the same missile. But a bullet did not come out leaving a neat hole like that, nor, certainly did it singe the hair about its exit. To all appearance two of these small bullets must have been fired in exactly the same line from above and below the head. And that made no kind of sense.

"No," he admitted candidly. "Have you any theories?"

"No, sir. It beats me."

"What's happened to the thing now?" the other went on. "Is it still buzzing?"

"No, sir. That stopped some time ago. Not a sound from it when I went in to fetch the cat. Quite inert it seems now."

The other, older man tugged thoughtfully at his mustache.

"We'll give it an hour or so, just in case," he decided, "and then if nothing's happened I think we'd better move it somewhere where it can be properly examined."

* * *

Extract from the Journal of Onns.

GOD, WHAT frightful place is this! Into what fantastic hell are we condemned? Where is our beautiful blue planet that shone so brave with hope? We do not understand, we are utterly bewildered, our minds reel with the horror of this place. We, the lords of creation cower before the monstrosities that face us. How can we hope to tame a world like this?

We hide now in a dark cavern while Iss, our leader, consults and decides what is best to do. None of us envies him his responsibility. What provision can man make against not only the unknown, but against the incredible? Nine hundred and sixty-four of us depend on him. There were a thousand: this was the way of it.

I heard the drill stop boring and than a clanking as it was dismantled and withdrawn from its

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long shaft. Soon after that came the call for assembly. We crawled out of our compartments, collected our personal belongings and met in the central space. Iss himself called the roll. Everyone answered except four; they, poor fellows, had not stood the strain of the journey.

Iss made a brief speech.

It was done, he reminded us, and it was irrevocable. No one knew what awaited us outside the Globe. If it should somehow happen that our party was divided, each group should elect a leader and go forward.

"It is long courage, not brief bravery, that is needed," he said. "This is the time for wisdom, not heroics. Remember always that one life lost now means thousands unborn. We must think of ourselves continually as the seed of the future. A handful of precious seed setting ourselves to grow a new civilization—and not one grain can we afford to lose."

He was impressive in his earnestness as he hammered home the responsibility of every one of us.

"We do not know, and we can never know," he went on, "how the other Globes may have fared. And, not knowing, we must act as though we alone had survived and as if all that Forta has stood for lay only in our hands.

"Now we pass into our new lives."

It was he who led the way down the passage so newly bored and he who first set foot in the new land. I followed with the rest, filled with such confliction of feelings as I had never known.

And the world into which we emerged: how shall I describe it in all its alien quality?

TO begin with, it was gloomy and shadowed, yet it was not night. Such light as there was came from a vast grey panel which hung in the dusky sky. From where we stood it appeared trapezial, but I suspect that was a trick of perspective and that it was, in fact, a square bisected into four smaller squares by two vast dark bars.

In the murk above it was possible dimly to make out faint lines intersecting at strange angles. I could not guess at their significance.

The ground we stood on was like nothing I had known. It was vast, ridged plain and covered with small, loose boulders. The strata had somehow been twisted to the vertical and its edges lay all one way disappearing into the gloomy distance before and behind. Close beside us was a crevasse as wide as my own height, running either way in a perfectly straight line. Beyond it, 150 feet or so away was another crack running exactly parallel to it and similar distances beyond, a third and an indication of a fourth.

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The man beside me was nervous. He muttered something about a geometrical world lit by a square sun.

"Rubbish!" I said, shortly.

"Then how do you explain it?" he asked.

"I do not rush into facile explanation," I told him. "I observe; then, when I have enough data, I deduce."

"Well, do a bit of deduction about the noise and the shaking," he suggested, not too politely.

I had been half aware of these things before. Somewhere far away an irregular thudding was going on which resulted in almost constant tremors of the ground beneath us. As I peered round, seeking the source of the disturbance, an alarming thing occurred. An extra loud thud shook us more than the rest and simultaneously the lower half of the square of light was blotted out. I will not deny it caused me some apprehension. I looked to see the upper half vanish too, but mercifully it did not.

By this time we were all assembled outside the Globe and waiting for Iss to give directions. He was about to speak when we were interrupted by a new sound. A kind of regular soft padding, sometimes with a rasping scratch accompanying it. For a moment we were all frozen with apprehension, and before we could move, the most fearsome monster emerged from behind the Globe.

Every historic traveler's tale pales beside the reality of the thing we now saw. Never would I have believed that such a creature could exist had I not seen it myself. First there came a face thrusting round the side of the Globe, hanging in the air 250 feet above us. It was a sight to make the bravest of us recoil.

Black it was, so that against the darkness overhead it was difficult to be sure of its outline, but it broadened at the top and above the head itself one seemed to catch a glimpse of two towering pointed ears. It looked down on us from two vast glowing eyes which were set aslant and can have measured no less than 12 feet from corner to corner.

FOR a moment it paused, the great eyes blinked and then it came closer. The legs which then appeared were like massive pillars, yet they moved with a dexterity and control unbelievable in members so vast. Both legs and feet were covered with closely set fibres which looked like strands of shining black metal. It bent its legs, lowering its head to look at us more closely and the fearful stench of its breath blew over us. Its face was still more alarming now. It opened a cavern of a mouth, an enormous pink tongue flicked out and back. Above the

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mouth pointed spines, some of them 50 feet and more long, stood out sideways, trembling. The eyes were still fixed on us, cold, cruel, non-intelligent.

Until then we had been transfixed, but now panic took some of us. Those nearest fell hurriedly back, and at that one of the feet moved like lightning. A huge black paw with suddenly outthrust claws smacked down. And when it slowly slid back, 20 of our men and women were no more than smears on the ground.

We were paralyzed, all of us except Iss, who forgetful of his own instructions about personal safety, was running toward the creature. As we waited, the great paw rose, hovered and struck at us again. Eleven fell to that second murderous blow.

Then I saw Iss. He was standing between the paws. His firerod was in his hands, and he was looking up at the monstrous head above him. As I watched, he lifted the weapon and aimed. Such folly against that huge thing, such heroic folly! Yet Iss was wiser than I. Suddenly the head jerked, a tremor shook the limbs, and without a sound the monster dropped where it stood.

And Iss . . . ? Well, there died a very brave man.

Sunss took charge.

We must find a place of safety, he decided, as soon as possible in case more of such monsters were lurking about. Once we had that, we could start to remove our instruments and equipment from the Globe and consider our next step. Accordingly, he led us forward down the broad way between two of the crevasses.

After traveling about half a mile we reached the foot of a great perpendicular cliff with curious rectangular formations on the face. At the base we found this cavern which seems to run a great distance both ways and though its depth is irregular, its height is strangely constant at some two feet above our heads.

Here we have a refuge from such monsters as that which Iss killed. It is too narrow for those huge paws, and even the great claws could only rake a little way inside.

A TERRIBLE thing has happened. We are still in the cavern. Sunss and a party of twenty went off to find if there were another way out other than that on to the plain where our Globe lay.

Lay! Past tense—there is our calamity.

After he had gone, the rest of us waited keeping watch. For a long time nothing happened. Evidently and mercifully, the monster was alone. It lay in a great black mound close to our Globe. Then a curious thing took place. More light suddenly poured over

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the plain. An enormous beam came into view. It descended, hooked itself to the slain monster and dragged it away out of sight. Then there was thunderous noise which shook everything about us, and the light dimmed again.

I do not pretend to understand these things, none of us can understand them, our reason reels before what we have seen; I can do no more than keep a faithful record.

Another long period passed without event. We were beginning to worry about what had happened to Sunss and his party, for they had been away several hours, when the most disastrous happening of all occurred without warning.

Again the plain became lighter. The ground beneath us set up a reverberating rumble and shook so violently to a series of shocks that we were hard put to keep our feet. Peering out of the cavern I saw a sight that even now I can scarcely credit. Forms beside which our previous monster was insignificant: living, moving creatures reared upon two legs and standing 16 or 17 hundred feet high—I know I shall not be believed when I speak of such a thing as an animal almost a third of a mile in height, but, God knows, it is the truth. Little wonder that the whole plain groaned and rumbled and shook under a burden of five such. They bent over our Globe, they put their forelegs to it, and lifted it—yes, actually lifted that ponderous, mighty Globe from the ground. The shaking beneath us became worse as they took its weight and stumbled away on colossal feet.

IT was too much for some of us. A hundred men ran out from our cavern, cursing, weeping and brandishing their firerods, but it was too late and the range was too great for them to do anything effective—besides, what could hope to be effective against colossi such as these?

Our Globe and all its precious contents are gone. We have nothing now, nothing with which to start building our new world, save our own trifling possessions . . . .

Nor was that the only calamity. A few minutes later two of Sunss's companions came back with a dreadful tale to tell. Behind our cavern they had found a warren of broad tunnels foul with the smell of unknown creatures. They had made their way down them with difficulty. Several times they had been beset by different varieties of six legged creatures of horrible appearance. Many of these were larger than themselves, fearfully armed with spines and claws, and filled with a vicious ferocity which caused them to attack on sight.

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Terrifying though they appeared it soon became clear that they were only really dangerous when they made unexpected attacks. Once they had been seen the fire-rods made short work of them.

After a number of fights Sunss had succeeded in reaching open country beyond the tunnels without loss of a man. It was when they were on the way back to fetch us that catastrophe had overtaken them. They had been attacked by fierce, grey-furred creatures 50 feet long and more, which they took to be the builders of the tunnels. It was a terrible fight in which most of the party perished before the huge brutes were overcome. Sunss himself had fallen, and of all his men only these two had been in a fit condition to make the rest of the journey.

It is a terrible, ghastly tragedy.

Now we have chosen Muin as our leader. He has decided that we must go forward. The plain behind us is barren, our Globe is gone, if we stay here we starve, so we must go through the tunnels to the open country beyond, trusting that there are no more gray monsters to attack us on the way.

And God grant that beyond the tunnels this nightmare world gives place to sanity.

Is it so much that we ask—to live, to work, to build, in peace?

* * *

I'VE been wanting to ask you all evening," said Sally, as she and Graham left the Post that night, "only I thought it better not to in front of the rest. What's happened about Daddy's 'meteorite'? What was it really?"

Graham chuckled.

"That's just what they'd like to know. It's got them absolutely guessing—only that's all very *sub rosa* and confidential. When they got it away and examined it, it appeared to be a solid lump of metal without any joints. In one place there was a hole about half an inch in diameter which appeared to go straight in to about halfway through the thing. Well, they scratched their heads about the best way to tackle it and decided that the only thing to do short of blasting it to bits was to cut it in half. So they rigged up a kind of automatic sawing device, set it going, and bunged in a funk hole—just in case. And now they're even more puzzled than before."

"Why, what happened?"

"Nothing. When they went back, there was the ball in neat halves. The metal casing was about six inches thick, then there was a two or three inch layer of soft fine dust in which were bits of metal and other substances of

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all shapes—there's some mystery there, incidentally, about which the man who told me was very close—then inside another metal wall was an odd formation of cells for all the world, he said, like a section of honeycomb, only it was made of some rubbery, flexible material instead of wax, and every cell was empty. Finally, there was a hollow space about 5 or 6 inches in diameter in the middle.

"There's the secret weapon—and if you can make anything of that, you're cleverer than they are. Even the dust in it wasn't explosive. So they're all asking one another what, if anything, it could even remotely be expected to do."

"Oh, dear," said Sally, "that'll annoy Daddy. He was so sure it was a meteorite. I wish it had been. It's not a nice thought that people are continually devising newer and more mysterious weapons which we may come on unexpectedly at any time. It's such waste. There's such a terrible lot of waste in the world."

She tilted back her head, looking up at the starry sky.

"I wish we could be out there."

"You said that last night," he reminded her.

"I know. But I still wish I could." She turned her head and glanced sidelong at him. "You're thinking it's escapism or defeatism or something. Well, perhaps it is in a way, but it depends on the angle you see it from. I think lots of the early American colonists must have felt like that: they left Europe not because they were afraid but because they were full of hope. They were going to build a new world—but the old one caught them up.

"But think how grand it would be to go out, perhaps near that bright star there, to take all the best with us and leave all the worst behind. Think of setting out in a huge ship, all the people who really hate war and dirt and cruelty and oppression, of landing on a new planet. We'd get rid of all those things that tie us and keep us wandering round and round in the same old boggy mess. We'd start fresh and clean and then what a lovely, lovely world we would build."

Graham put up a hand to push back her hood. He turned her face toward him. It was pale in the faint light, her fair hair was silvery, her eyes lost in dark shadows. "Oh, my sweet, must you always cry for the stars? There are some lovely things here too, you know."

A BEAM of notable brilliance swiveled and switched erratically beside the Fontain's house.

Graham and Sally walked a little more quickly.

"You'll excuse me mentioning it, my dear, but your father is

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rapidly becoming a national menace as well as a local problem. He can't be looking for *another* meteorite."

"He isn't," said Sally, "this time it's the dog. Listen."

A voice was cajoling. "Litty! Litty! Litty!" and interspersing it with whistles.

"Thoroughly improper behavior," Graham said, "illuminating the whole countryside—to find a dog with a name like Litty."

"Short for Litvinor. He's such a tactful dog."

The calling was suddenly interrupted by a burst of frenzied barking diminishing quickly into whining yelps.

By the time they reached the house all was quiet, and the light had disappeared round the far side.

"You've found him? What's happened?" called Sally, from the yard entrance.

Mr. Fontain was over by the shed, bending down and playing his light on the ground.

"Yes, my dear. I—I'm afraid something's happened to him."

"You don't mean he's dead?" She hurried forward.

"I'm afraid I do, dear."

"Oh, poor Litty," she said, going down on her knees beside the body. I wonder what . . . ?" She broke off with a sudden cry and jumped. "Oh, something's stung me. Oh, it hurts." She clutched at her leg, tears of anguish suddenly starting to her eyes.

"What on earth . . . ?" began her father. He switched his light on to the ground. "What are those things there, ants?"

Graham bent down.

"No, they're not ants. I don't know what they are." He picked one of the little things up and set it on the palm of his glove to look at it more closely.

"Never seen anything like that before," he said.

Mr. Fontain came closer and looked, too.

It was a queer little creature no more than a quarter of an inch long. Its body seemed to be an almost perfect hemisphere with the flat side below and the round, top surface as shiny as a ladybird's wing cases, colored pink. It was insect-like save that it stood on only four short legs. There was, moreover, no clearly defined head, just two eyes set in the edge of the shiny dome. As they watched, it reared up on two of its legs showing a pale, flat underside with a mouth set just below the eyes. In its forelegs it seemed to be holding a bit of grass or thin wire.

Graham suddenly felt a searing pain in his hand. "Hell and damnation," he said, shaking it off, "the little brute certainly *can* sting. Look, there's a hole in my glove. Feels as if there's one in my hand as well. I don't know

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what kind of bugs they are, but they're certainly not things to have around. Got a spray?"

"In the scullery there," said Mr. Fontain, and turned his attention to his daughter.

"Better?" he inquired.

"Hurts like hell," she said, between her teeth.

"Just hang on a minute till we've settled this; then we'll have a look at it."

Graham hurried back with the spray in his hand.

"Put the light over here," he said.

The beam revealed several hundred of the little pink objects crawling toward the wall of the shed. Graham pumped clouds of insecticide vapor over them and watched while they slowed, waved feeble legs, then lay still. He sprayed a little more around the neighborhood for luck.

"That's about finished them," he said. "Nasty vicious little brutes, weren't they?"

THE END

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ON THE SAND PLANET

IN THE NEW DECEMBER AMAZING

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(Continued from page 41)
securely bolted, then went to collapse in a corner in utter exhaustion.

Jeffers shook him awake. Gray daylight poured gloomily through the ports.

"Wake up, Lieutenant! There's a guy coming across from the cliff—"

He groaned. "Johnny again!"

"Uh-uh! It's Richards—only he's slightly green."

"*Who!*" Rod sat up quickly.

"Richards—the first guy to disappear from Launch One!"

"It *can't* be!"

"Look for yourself."

Rod bounded to a port and peered out at the gray day, and at the solitary figure who walked solemnly toward them.

"It *is* Richards—in body, anyhow." He went to the airlock, gun in hand, and unbolted it. The lock slid open. Richards stopped.

"Really, old man! There's no need for the gun," he called.

Rod took note of the gray-green discoloration of his skin and shuddered. "Uh-uh! You stay back, Jungle-boy!"

Richards' forehead creased irritably. "That any way to greet an old friend, Esp? I say! Let me in."

"Jungle tricks! You can't be alive."

"Ridiculous! I'm here, am I not?"

English accent and all, he was there—but for all Rod knew, Johnny might have been the spit'n image of one of the original Crusoes to be marooned here. He kept the gun trained on Richards' mid-section.

"Suppose you explain your existence," he snapped.

"It's quite simple. I merely got ripe, Esperson."

"Got *what?*"

"Got ripe—R-I-P-E—as in ripe tomato."

"You mean—!"

"Exactly. I woke up inside one of those silly gourd-fruit. I kicked my way out, and here I am."

"As a substitute for Johnny?"

"Not at all. I am *I*—tch! But that lacks sense. How shall I say it? I remember being me before—well, it all happened."

"You mean the jungle swallowed you—"

"It seems to have taken me apart and put me back together again."

"Anything missing?" Rod grunted sourly.

"As a matter of fact—*yes*. It forgot my navel."

"You don't need it. Jeffers?"

"Yeah, Lieutenant?"

"Get a shot of pentothal out of the kit. Give him a dose—enough to knock him out. We'll haul him aboard and tie him up. Commission would probably like a look at the life-forms from this planet."

Richards sputtered angrily,

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but submitted when Jeffers let himself down to the ground and hobbled toward him with a hypodermic. Rod listened to his irritable protests, and found himself becoming half convinced.

"I kinda believed the guy, Lieutenant," Jeffers panted as they hauled the limp crewman through the lock.

Esperson remained doubtful. "If it's true, how come there weren't three guys here when Rogan's launch landed?"

"Maybe they're around. Or, maybe they died."

"Yeah."

He went to the communicator and tried another call: "*Archangel* from Launch Two. Give me a call. Over."

The response was feeble but immediate. "Isaacs from Allenby, Isaacs from Allenby. Read you S-2 but clear. We'd about given you up. What happened? Over."

Esperson breathed a sigh of relief. "This is Rod, Al. Isaacs isn't here. No time to explain. We'll rendezvous on schedule, but we may have to come down here again to pick up stragglers—if any. Over."

There was a pause. Then Allenby relayed the *Archangel*'s position and velocity data for rendezvous purposes. Rod felt Jeffers nudging him. "Lieutenant! There is another one coming."

"I'll call you later, Al!" he said to the mike, then bracketed it and stepped to the lock.

"Elvin!"

"Yeah, the second guy missing."

"Load him aboard the same way. We take no chances."

An hour later, the launch's rockets sputtered, coughed a blue haze, then spurted an incandescent blast that lifted it as a skyward arrow. Richards and Elvin lay trussed securely in the rear of the ship.

"I never believed we'd make it, Lieutenant," Jeffers sighed, relaxing for the first time.

"It seems too damn easy," Rod grunted.

"Why?"

"Well—there's nothing more ruthless, or more clever, than a man that's obsessed with knowledge. And that goes for a jungle too. The thirst to know can be worse than any other type of obsession."

Jeffers glanced over his shoulder at the two sleepers and chuckled. "Well, at least she returns the books she borrows."

"I wonder," murmured Esperson as the ship burst through the cloud layer on its upward streak for space.

The jungle steamed and dripped. The jungle hissed and suckled and belched. It captured a new insect, took it apart, and made a replica to lure others just

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like it. And the replica was devoted to its mother, who used it.

The jungle writhed and danced and grew. The jungle waited, feeling a sensual glow.

Some insects were more interesting than others, and she hated to let them go. But by parting with two, she would soon gain seventy more—and by spending the seventy. . . .

The jungle gleefully counted her gains. And there was a place called Earth. . . .

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LETTERS

Dear Editor:

Congratulations upon rescuing science-fiction's oldest magazine as it went down for the third time. In two issues you have done a fine job of rehabilitation.

The return of artwork was greatly appreciated. Only one small suggestion here and that is to have at least one illustration for every story or article and numerous ones for the longer pieces. Also that they be for the most part full pagers and not the tiny little things in the corner that prevailed in your first issue of *Fantastic*.

I agree with Richie Benyo that you keep definite science fiction out of *Fantastic* and instead slant that magazine towards Fantasy. With the added 32 pages making a total over 160 pages, you can certainly publish all the worthwhile science fiction you obtain for two months in *Amazing* and keep it out of *Fantastic*.

Once again, congratulations on publishing two fine magazines. Your shortcomings are only minor, and I am sure they will disappear with time.

Jim Schumacher
418 Kenoak Dr.
Pomona, Calif.

P.S. One question: What has happened to Virgil Finlay? I haven't seen any of his work in yours or anyone else's magazine for a very long time.

● *Finlay? See the Miller story in this issue—for which we've reproduced some magnificent examples of his work, on a par with any of the great illustrations he did for the old* Weird Tales *and the Merritt stories in* Famous Fantastic Mysteries.*—Editor.*

Dear Editor:

This is in response to your request for letters in the editorials of *Amazing* and *Fantastic*. Having just finished your first issues, I thought I would give you some of my opinions, and make a suggestion or two on what I would like the magazines to contain.

Your decision to run old stories in both magazines is perhaps the main departure you have made editorially. *Amazing* did, however, have occasional old stories three or four years ago when I had a subscription.

I think your opinion that good stories are good even if they are old is valid. Certainly "Sally" was a good story, and well worth reading.

—There are a couple of features I would like to see in one or both of your magazines. I would like to see the editorials continued. I would prefer having them deal with S-F and things of interest to S-F readers. In other words, I would not like an *Analog*-type editorial.—I would also like a letter column and a book-review department. Perhaps you could continue the book reviews in *Amazing*, and print letters in *Fantastic*.

Roger Vanous
213 Waugh St.
Columbia, Mo. 65201

● *The letter column, you yourself have helped revive. As for editorials concentrating on science fiction and fantasy—that's the way we see it too, so we'll be keeping them that way.—Editor.*

Dear Editor:

Since your change with the August issue, you now have the best magazine of fantasy on the market. Your idea of using older material is admirable, to say the least. However you have not carried through on this idea. "Sally" was a good story, but it was too new. 1946 is not old, and most of Asimov's early stories are obtainable in collections now anyway. I would suggest you use a different author, perhaps one whose stories are out of print now.

David Dewsnap
Editor Fan-Fic
4 Eldredge St.
Newton, Mass. 02158

● *The more mail we get on the subject, the more we're convinced that dates are relative: For some 1946 may not be old, but for the many readers who commended us for*

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bringing back "Sally" (which they'd never seen), the original date of publication was irrelevant. (By the way, it first appeared in 1953, not in 1946.)—As for the question of availability, as far as we have been able to find out, "Sally" had never been reprinted in any other form until we selected it for the September issue.—Editor.

Dear Editor:

There were many improvements in the September *Fantastic* such as the additional thirty-two pages and the excellent list of name authors and the individual selling of *Fantastic* stories. Yet in one very important way it was not so good as the old Z-D mag. It is that in cover, in interior illustrations, and in half of the stories it was practically an S-F prozine, while in the little bit that was left it was fantasy.

Starting with the cover, the "Science Fiction" above the *Fantastic* precedes the "Fantasy," a bad indication for fantasy fans whose last hope was in *Fantastic*. The Martian on the cover is indeed a good example of scientific extrapolation. But scientific extrapolation is for an S-F magazine like *Amazing*, while high adventure and magic and terror and escape belong in a fantasy magazine. Of the stories, "Sally" and "You'll Never Go Home Again" are simply science fiction. "The Dark Room" started out with an ordinary party. The story was so everyday-like at first that I almost gave up reading it before I came to the fantasy part—*and even that wasn't particularly fantastic.* The Gray Mouser story as usual was excellent, and it, along with "The Worm," comprised the fantasy part of the issue. As for the illustrations, they were based on the stories. Just about everyone who reads *Fantastic* must do it because of its fantasy. If they wanted S-F, they would probably have bought one of the six good magazines S-F already has. It would be tragic if *Fantastic* became the seventh S-F magazine.

—About the artwork, the illustrations should generally be dark and mysterious and should evoke escape or wonder. A good example is the page 23 illo to "The Unholy Grail" (October, 1962). Horror illos are a lot better when they show horror in people's faces and minds than when they show horrible beasts or things. After the so-called science-fiction movies, anything that the artist can create will seem a paltry horror. Every illo should show people and people's faces and expressions. Finally, the illustrations which show many different things all mixed together (such as that to "Stardock" on page 6) are not so good as those which show just a single scene. Nevertheless, I'm just glad that *Fantastic* has illustrations again.

These are just ideas concerning the outward decor of *Fantastic*. Actually, as a fantasy reader, I'd just be happy if *Fantastic* stays fantastic. I plead with you not to make it an S-F magazine publishing occasional fantasy, but rather a fantasy magazine publishing occasional science fiction. Little Great Britain even has a fantasy magazine. Is it to show up the whole of North America?

Charlie Obler
Box 154, East Campus
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Mass.

● *We have no intention of making Fantastic the "seventh S-F magazine." As proof, see the November issue (predominantly fantasy) and this one—especially the Laumer, Sheckley and Anderson pieces. For that matter, there's more horror in "Six and Ten Are Johnny" than in many ghost stories we also admire—though not as much, we'll admit, as in Keller's classic "The Worm."—Editor.*

Editorial (Cont. from page 4)

thing about it—as Frank R. Paul, Elliott Dold, and Virgil Finlay did for their day—then much of their *new* work will continue to wear that certain look of growing obsolescence—sometimes even before the canvas has had a chance to dry. —JR

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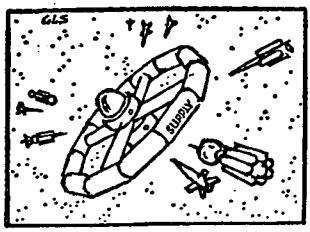

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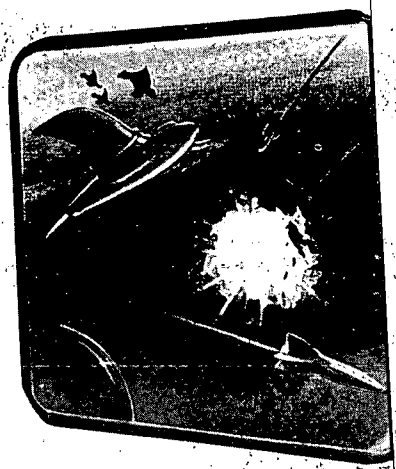

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